

A Simple Twist of Fate

TheRealThing

Star Wars

Complete



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Summary

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Description:

Destiny brings Darth Vader's twin son and daughter, who he has believed dead for ten years, into his life unexpectedly.

Chapter 1

One

Coruscant

Ten years. It had been ten years since the blackest day of his existence, and yet everyone in the galaxy seemed to be celebrating. Today was the anniversary of the beginning of the Empire, a day celebrated in grand style here on Coruscant. And yet, for Vader, the anniversary he acknowledged in the silence of his heart was far less worthy of celebration. It was the anniversary of the death of his beloved wife, his Angel. Padmé.

Ten years had passed since her death, since the death of their unborn child, and yet Vader was no closer now to recovering from the loss of her than he was on the day it happened. He had learned to sublimate his sorrow, however; to bury his anger over losing her deep down inside of him. And yet on this day, it was impossible not to think of her.

Vader tried to imagine what his life would have been like had she lived. They would be raising their child together right now, their daughter. *She would be ten years old*, he reflected. *And probably the image of her mother...*

Vader pushed the thoughts from his mind, angry for allowing himself to dwell on them. He had taught himself not to think of her, not to dwell on the possibilities for it only left him feeling emptier than he already did. And that was no mean feat.

His life since that day had been nothing but duty. Serving his master, the galactic Emperor Palpatine, had become his sole reason for existing. Serving the Empire that they had forged in the blood of the Jedi was the sole focus of his energies. He had a busy life, a very busy life; but that was not to say that it was a full one.

The crowds began to cheer wildly as the fireworks began, a spectacular display of pyrotechnics that filled the Coruscant sky. Vader watched too, knowing his presence here was expected. If his master knew how he truly felt about this day, he would be most displeased.

Palpatine had made it quite clear to Vader over the years how he felt about Vader's relationship with his wife, and never missed an opportunity to remind his servant how it was he himself who had killed her. Vader needed no reminders, however; he had lived with the results of his actions on the day for ten years now, suffering more than his share of nightmares over that time.

"A stunning display, as always."

Vader turned to his master who stood at his side on the balcony overlooking the proceedings. The lights of the fireworks flickered over the aged face of the emperor, highlighting the deep set wrinkles that creased it. "Yes my master," Vader agreed at last. "Impressive, most impressive."

Palpatine smiled, knowing very well what this day signified. Although Vader had never said it, for he knew better than to do so, Palpatine knew that this day was a most painful

reminder for Vader.

As the fireworks display ended, Vader excused himself from the emperor. The rest of the evening would be spent at the theatre, where there would be a gala of song, dance and drama commemorating the glorious inception of the Empire. Palpatine had never required Vader to attend such events, for which Vader was grateful. He secretly suspected that the loudness of his respirator was the reason Palpatine didn't want him there. Whatever the reason, Vader was more than happy to leave.

Returning to his speeder, he was angered to see that the speeder that had parked beside his had creased his back bumper. Using the Force Vader lifted the offending vehicle high in the air and then sent it flying across the parking arcade where it crashed against one of the durasteel walls. *That felt good*, he reflected as he climbed into the speeder. Revving the engine he pulled out and headed for home, glad that the day was finally over.

Alderaan — the Royal Palace

"Happy birthday dear Leia, happy birthday to you!"

Princess Leia Organa leaned forward and blew out the ten candles on her cake and then sat back and basked in the applause of her family and friends gathered there to celebrate her special day.

"Did you make a wish?" her mother asked as a serving droid removed the cake from the table.

Leia nodded.

"What did you wish for?" one of her friends asked.

"If I tell you it won't come true," Leia pointed out.

Leia's parents, Breha and Bail Organa, looked at one another with a smile. There was very little that Leia could have wished for, as her parents indulged her in every way. Not that Leia was spoiled; she was a loving child, bright and intelligent. Having adopted Leia as an infant, they could not love her any more than if she had been their own flesh and blood.

After opening a veritable inundation of presents, Leia and her guests retired to the enormous garden to play games while the adults remained at the table to enjoy their coffee.

"She's certainly growing up to be a beauty," one of the women present commented.

"Yes," Bail agreed. "I'll have to hire a body guard soon to keep the boys away," he added.

This created a ripple of laughter from the guests.

"I wasn't kidding," Bail insisted. He looked at Breha, who merely shrugged in response.

It was quite late that night when Breha and Bail finally got Leia settled down enough for bed.

"Today was a big day," Breha said as she sat on the edge of Leia's bed. "Your tenth birthday, that's quite a big moment in a girl's life."

Leia nodded sleepily. “Does that mean I can come with Dad to Coruscant next week?” she asked.

Breha looked back at her husband.

“It’s just a boring meeting, Leia,” Bail said, trying not to sound as concerned as he felt. “Political talk, nothing you’d be interested in.”

“I *am* interested in politics,” Leia insisted, sitting up in her bed. “And besides, I’ve never been to Coruscant.”

“Yes you have,” Breha countered, as anxious to keep her daughter from the capital as Bail was.

“I was a baby!” Leia protested. “I don’t remember anything! Please!? *Please!*”

Breha and Bail looked at one another again.

“I’ll think about it,” Bail said at last, stalling until he could find a good reason why she couldn’t go. “But now it’s time for bed.”

Leia smiled as she settled back down into her bed. ‘I’ll think about it’ wasn’t no, after all.

“Goodnight, Leia,” Breha said, bending to her daughter and kissing her.

“Goodnight Mother,” Leia replied. “Goodnight Father,” she said, smiling at Bail.

“Goodnight darling,” Bail replied. “Sweet dreams,” he said and then left the room.

Leia waited until he had left and then looked up at her mother. “Do you want to know what I wished for?” she asked.

Breha smiled, glad the subject had changed. “If you’d like to tell me,” she replied.

“I wished for a little brother,” Leia told her with a smile. “I dream I have one all the time. He’s beautiful with big blue eyes and golden hair.”

Breha did not know how to respond to this, and merely smiled. “Time for sleep now, love,” she said, pulling the covers up. “Sweet dreams.”

Leia closed her eyes, the smile still on her face, hoping that tonight she’d dream again about the little brother she’d always wanted.

Tatooine

“A model TIE fighter! Thanks a lot! This is awesome!”

Beru Lars smiled at her nephew as he admired the ship. “You’re welcome, Luke,” she replied.

“How did you know I wanted this more than anything?” Luke asked his uncle and aunt.

“Oh, you’ve only been talking about it for weeks now,” Owen remarked with a smile.

Luke smiled sheepishly. “Yeah, I guess I have,” he replied. “But thanks anyway. I love it. And I’ll take really *really* good care of it, I promise.”

“Just make sure you do, boy,” Owen replied. “That cost a lot of money.”

Beru looked at him with a shake of her head, wishing he didn't try to make Luke feel guilty by bringing up money. Luke had so little, and appreciated everything he had. And besides it wasn't every day that a boy turned ten.

Luke, however, seemed oblivious at this point, and simply continued to admire his precious gift.

"Time for cake," Beru announced as she picked up the small birthday cake from the table and carried it into the kitchen.

"So tell me more about this trip your teacher told me about," Owen asked. "We never went on trips when I was in school, you know," he felt compelled to add.

"It's a trip to Coruscant," Luke told him, "to visit the Imperial Military Museum."

"Coruscant is pretty far," Owen said doubtfully. "How do they expect people to afford that kind of passage?"

"The school is paying for it," Luke replied. "We had that big fund raiser last month, remember?" he reminded his uncle.

"Oh yeah," Owen replied, suddenly realizing why there were so many boxes of cookies in the house all the time. 'I don't know, Luke,' he said. "I don't like this, not one little bit."

"What are we talking about?" Beru asked as she reentered the room, a plate in each hand with a big piece of cake.

"The trip to Coruscant," Luke said. "Uncle Owen won't let me go."

"I didn't say that," Owen grumbled. "I said I don't like it."

Beru sat down with a sigh. She knew exactly why Owen didn't want Luke going to the capital; Darth Vader was there. Owen and Beru had worked very hard to keep Luke as sheltered as possible, and as far from Vader as possible.

"Please Uncle Owen?" Luke asked. 'It's only for two days, our teacher will have lots of chaperones,' he said. "I've never been anywhere!" he added for good measure.

"Whining will get you no where, boy," Owen pointed out. He sighed, and looked at his wife, who, as usual, was keeping out of the argument. "I'll think about it," he said at last.

Luke grinned. "Thanks Uncle Owen," he said. "You're the best!"

Beru looked up at Owen as Luke dug into his cake, wondering how he was going to talk his way out of this one.

Chapter 2

Two

Imperial Palace, Coruscant— One week later

“Ah, Lord Vader, nice of you to finally come,” Palpatine said sourly as Vader bowed before him.

“The delay was unavoidable, my master,” Vader replied, hoping he’d caught the emperor in a good mood. “I apologize for my tardiness.”

Palpatine sighed melodramatically. “It is of no concern,” he said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “I called you here to tell you that I am leaving this morning. I am going to the Death Star to check on Tarkin’s progress. He seems to be dragging things out rather unnecessarily.”

Vader had his own opinion of Tarkin, but decided to keep it to himself. For some reason the slimy little man had found favor with the emperor and was always quick to use that to his advantage. “How long will you be gone?” he asked.

“I should say at least two weeks,” Palpatine replied. ‘While I’m away, I want you to attend the upcoming meetings that are scheduled to start this morning. Viceroy Organa is trying to pass some law to improve wages among the working class,’ he said, sounding thoroughly bored. “You know what a bleeding heart he is,” he added.

“Indeed,” Vader replied. The thought of sitting through days of meetings put Vader in a foul mood, particularly when Viceroy Organa would be in attendance. “I look forward to shooting down his proposals, my master.”

Palpatine cackled. “Excellent,” he replied. ‘Do enjoy yourself, Lord Vader,’ he said, standing up. “Now leave me, I am leaving within the hour and need to attend to a few things first.”

“I wish you a pleasant and productive journey,” Vader replied with a bow. He then turned and left the emperor, deciding it might be enjoyable to surprise the viceroy with his appearance at the meeting. *Yes, that will make it worthwhile,* he thought to himself. *Almost...*

Elsewhere on Coruscant

“Now Leia, I only agreed to let you come to this meeting so that you could learn something,” Bail told his young daughter. “You must be quiet and speak only when spoken to, do you understand?”

“Yes Father,” Leia said, resisting the urge to roll her eyes.

Bail frowned, knowing his daughter better than she realized. “I saw that,” he said as they walked into the conference room.

Leia looked up at him and was about to protest when the sight of the enormous room stopped her short. It was huge, with a large rectangular table in the center of it. The windows

reached from the floor to the high ceiling, filling the room with bright morning sunshine.

“Wow,” Leia said softly as she followed her father over to the conference table.

“Good morning,” Bail said to the others already seated. ‘I hope no one objects if the Princess is present at this meeting,’ he said. “Her mother thought it would be a good opportunity for her to learn more about the workings of the political system.”

“Not at all,” one man spoke up. “Princess Leia is most welcome.”

Leia smiled and took a seat beside her father, feeling very grown up.

The meeting had just begun when the doors opened and Darth Vader strode into the room. All talking ceased as the Dark Lord took a seat that had been hastily vacated for him at the head of the table.

“Lord Vader! This is an unexpected pleasure!” one sycophant gushed.

“As you were, governor,” Vader replied in annoyance. He looked over at Bail who was staring at him with barely concealed fear. And then he looked at the young girl seated beside the viceroy.

“I was not aware that children had a part in the decision making process of this Empire,” he said.

Leia’s eyes moved nervously from Vader back to Organa and then back again.

“I want to be a politician,” Leia finally spoke up, surprising everyone with her courage. “I think I could learn a lot from being here, Lord Vader.”

No one was more surprised by the girl’s outspokenness than Vader himself. He nodded as he considered her words. “Indeed, Princess,” he said. “And what exactly do you hope to learn?”

Leia was at a loss to know how to answer this, and looked to her father for support. Organa finally found his voice and spoke up.

“She only wants to observe,” he said. “But perhaps it would be better if she left,” he added, looking for any excuse to get Leia away from Vader.

“No, she may stay,” Vader said, sensing the man’s nervousness. Organa wasn’t usually like this, in fact he was usually quite forthright with Vader. *So why is he so nervous now?* Vader wondered, only half listening as the meeting resumed. *He’s more than nervous... he’s afraid.* He looked once more at the princess, noting for the first time just how much she resembled someone from his past. But that was merely coincidence, he decided. The recentness of the anniversary of Padmé’s death had heralded a lot of unwanted dreams about her, so much so that he was seeing her everywhere. And yet, there was something about this young girl that Vader couldn’t quite put his finger on. Something... familiar.

“And as I was saying,” Organa said, “raising the standard of living of the lower classes will, in the end, benefit the entire economy.”

“Do you realize what kind of expense this proposal of yours will incur?” one bureaucrat stated. “I hardly think the people will take kindly to a raise in their taxes, Viceroy.”

“Shouldn’t everyone be entitled to the same standard of living?” Leia said, once again surprising everyone. Organa shot her a hard look, but she continued nonetheless. “It’s not fair that some people have so much and others have so little,” she added.

“Leia, please,” Organa said. “Your opinion wasn’t asked for.”

Leia lowered her eyes to the table, her cheeks growing pink. Vader watched, feeling her embarrassment clearly across the table.

“I for one find the young princess’ comments to be most... refreshing,” Vader said. ‘But clearly this isn’t the venue for such innocence,’ he added, standing up. “Perhaps the Princess would like to take a walk? Perhaps something to eat?”

Leia looked up at Vader; his words making her feel better. *He’s not nearly as scary as I thought he’d be*, she reflected.

Organa was frozen in his chair and thought frantically for an excuse not to allow this.

“May I go, Father?” Leia asked, looking up at him.

Organa felt all eyes on him as she waited for an answer. “I don’t want to trouble you, Lord Vader,” he said at last.

“It’s no trouble at all,” Vader replied smoothly. “I could use a break anyway.”

Organa looked at Leia, knowing that to refuse would only raise Vader’s suspicions. “Well, I suppose so,” he said. “Be on your best behavior, Leia,” he added.

“I will,” she promised him as she stood up at once. Organa waited for her to leave before signaling for one of his security men to follow them.

Elsewhere on Coruscant

Luke Skywalker had never been so excited in the ten years of his short life. Coruscant! It was so exciting, full of enormous skyscrapers, magnificent buildings and lots of fast moving traffic. His guardians had agreed to allow him to come with his class to the capital under one condition: that they accompany him. At first the idea had mortified Luke, but when he learned that some of his friends were in the same position, he relaxed. By this point, he was far too excited to care, and watched with huge eyes as his Uncle Owen navigated the speeder through the early morning traffic on their way to the museum.

“Owen, relax,” Beru said, seeing the fine sheen of perspiration on her husband’s brow.

“We should have taken a bus,” he grumbled. “This is insanity, pure and simple.”

Beru smiled. “You’re doing fine,” she replied encouragingly. “Besides, we’re almost there.”

“I’ll fly if you want,” Luke piped up from the back seat.

“Nice try, boy,” Owen shot back, keeping his eyes straight ahead of him. ‘I will *never* come to this place again,’ he grumbled. “Not in a thousand years.”

Beru merely smiled, quite accustomed to her husband’s gruffness.

“So I guess you have to go to a lot of meetings,” Leia commented as she and Vader sat in the refectory. Leia had a snack of shurba fruit sorbet, Vader had noted with interest.

“Yes,” he replied. “It’s part of my job.”

Leia nodded. “Do you like your job?” she asked.

“Most of the time,” Vader replied. He found her openness and innocence very refreshing. “Do you like being a princess?” he countered.

“Most of the time,” Leia replied with a smile. She took a spoonful of her sorbet as she considered what she was about to say next. ‘You know,’ she decided to say, “you’re not nearly as scary in person as you are on the holonet.”

Vader was surprised by her comment. “Is that so?”

Leia nodded.

“And how often do you watch the holonet?” he asked.

Leia shrugged. “Not often,” she replied. “My parents don’t like me watching it much, especially when you’re on it.”

“Interesting,” Vader commented. “I suppose they must find me too scary for a young princess to be exposed to.”

Leia laughed at his comment, sensing that he meant it to be a joke. “Maybe so,” she agreed. She looked at him, trying to work up the nerve to ask the question she’d always wondered about. She knew that her father would probably ground her for a year if he knew what she was about to ask. ‘Why do you wear that mask?’ she asked. “Is it to look scary? Or do you have to wear it?”

“Perhaps both,” he told her.

“You mean you have to wear it?” she persisted.

Vader nodded.

“Why?” Leia asked.

Vader was shocked that the child was so forthright. She reminded him of someone, someone from his past. “I was in a terrible accident,” he told her. “I must wear this to breath.”

“Oh,” Leia replied. “Sorry.”

Vader said nothing in response but merely watched the child eat her sorbet for a moment. He too had questions he wanted to ask her, questions that had begun to formulate in his mind since he had first seen her in the conference room.

“Tell me, Princess,” he said after a few moments. “What do you know about your real parents?”

Leia looked up at him, startled by the question. “My real parents?” she asked.

Vader nodded. “I know you are adopted,” he told her. “As I’m sure you do.”

"Yes, my parents told me four years ago that I was adopted," she said. "Although I really wasn't that surprised to hear it."

"And why is that?" he asked.

Leia shrugged. "I don't know exactly," she told him. "Maybe part of me knew all along, maybe deep down inside I remember my real mother."

Vader was certain that his heart missed a beat at this. "Your real mother? Do you know anything about her?"

"Only her name," Leia said, scooping out some more sorbet. "Her name was Padmé."

Vader said nothing for a long time, making Leia wonder if he was really listening to her. A thousand thoughts, memories and emotions raged through him at the mention of his wife's name. *So this is the child she was carrying*, he realized, looking at Leia with greater attention. *Of course she is, she's the image of her mother.*

"Are you certain that was her name?" he asked at last. "Your parents told you this?"

"No, I overheard them talking one night," she admitted. "They never want to talk about my real parents for some reason. It's kind of weird."

Vader nodded, feeling anger surge through him as he realized why Organa had been so nervous around him earlier. He had been hiding Vader's daughter from him for ten years now. He had good reason to be nervous.

"And what about your father?" he asked. "What did they tell you about him?"

"He died," she replied. "That's all they'll say," she added. "I don't even know his name."

Vader clenched his fists in anger. *No, of course not*, he thought angrily. *They'd rather hide you from your father than tell you anything about him.*

"Why are you so interested in my parents?" she asked. "No one ever asks me about them."

Vader looked at her, fighting to keep the rage out of his voice, not wishing to frighten her. "I knew your parents, Princess," he replied. "I knew them both."

"Uncle Owen this is the wrong way," Luke said, leaning forward.

Owen muttered a string of Hutttese curses under his breath that would have made his mother's hair curl. "I missed the damn turn," he replied shortly.

"But you can't go this way," Luke said, having already familiarized himself with the traffic patterns. "It's going to become one way very soon!"
Beru looked at her nephew with alarm. "Are you sure?" she asked.

Luke nodded, his eyes wide with fear.

"I'm trying to turn, damn it!" Owen shouted. "All this talking isn't helping!"

Luke sat back, not wanting to distract his uncle, but still wanting to help. He was starting to grow really afraid that they would end up going the wrong way in a one way laneway. And that would be really embarrassing. He could just imagine the refined Coruscanti natives

pointing at them, knowing that they were farmers from a back water planet. *I have a really bad feeling about this*, Luke thought as a feeling started to nag him at the back of his mind.

“Owen, look out!” Beru cried as he turned the speeder. It was a bad decision.

“You knew them?” Leia said. “How did you...” she stopped as a very strong feeling of terror washed over her. Her face went white. Vader, however, didn’t notice, for he too felt it.

“Something terrible has happened!” she cried.

Vader nodded, not surprised that she had felt the tremor as well. She was, after all, his child. The Force was strong with her. “You felt it too,” he remarked.

Leia nodded. “Yes,” she said softly. ‘I felt it right here,’ she said, pointing to her chest. “Like... someone grabbed my heart and squeezed it really hard.”

“Yes,” Vader agreed, deciding her description was an accurate one. The real question that burned in his mind was, what was it they had both felt? What could have caused such a tremor in the Force that they both felt it clearly?

“I... I think I should get back to my father,” she said shakily, standing up. “I don’t feel very good.”

Vader stood up with her. “I’ll take you to him,” he said.

Air ambulances raced to the site of the crash in time to capture both vehicles in a tractor beam before they lost attitude and careened down several hundred meters to the ground below. It had snarled up traffic for blocks, and the Coruscanti commuters were not terribly patient as they waited for it to clear.

Of the two speeders that were involved, there was little left that was recognizable. Grimly the paramedics checked through the two speeders, emergency kits in hand.

“Oh great stars above,” one of them muttered as they saw the lone driver of the smaller speeder. The woman had struck the other speeder head on as it had made an illegal turn. The force of the impact had crushed her against the controls of her speeder, for she had not been wearing her seat belt. “When are people gonna learn?” he asked his companion.

She just shook her head and activated her comlink. “Any survivors?” she asked the other members of their team who had boarded the other speeder.

“Yeah, they’re all alive right now,” a voice reported. “But in pretty rough shape. I’m getting them ready for transport.”

“Acknowledged,” she replied. ‘Contact the coroner,’ she told her partner. “We’ve got survivors in the other vehicle.”

Her partner nodded, and the two of them moved to the other speeder to assist the rest of the rescue team.

Bail Organa looked up anxiously as Leia ran into the room. He stood up and held her as she hugged him tightly. He frowned to see that she was trembling. Looking up at Vader, he was unable to hide the rage in his eyes.

“Was there a problem, Lord Vader?” he asked tersely.

It was all Vader could do not to crush the man's larynx where he stood. But for now his daughter needed this man, and he was not about to add to her distress. "Perhaps you ought to ask your daughter," he replied.

Organa heard the ever so slight emphasis on the word 'your'. His heart started to hammer within him as he fought to remain calm. He looked down at his daughter who was crying quietly against his chest.

"Leia, what's wrong? What happened?" he asked.

"I don't know," she sniffled. "I had one of those feelings."

Organa knew exactly what she was talking about. He had discovered long ago that his adopted daughter had inherited her biological father's Force sensitivity, for Leia was often able to foresee things before they happened.

"I want to go back to the hotel," she said quietly. "I feel sick."

Organa nodded, and then signaled for the security guard to come over. "Captain Antilles will take you," he said. "I must remain here."

Leia looked up at him, her ten year old sense of justice outraged. "Father, I need you!" she cried. "Is this stupid meeting more important than me?"

Organa felt his face grow warm as all eyes around the table were on him.

"I won't be much longer," Organa said at last, stroking Leia's dark hair. "Now run along, darling. I'll see you soon."

Leia gave Organa a look that Vader recognized very well; he'd been on the receiving end of it from the girl's mother more than once. He watched her as she left with the captain, and then turned his attention back to Organa.

"Your child is Force sensitive," he stated simply. "Interesting."

Organa said nothing, but sat down in his chair again, feeling as though his insides were twisting inside out.

Vader sat down as well, his gaze never leaving Organa, who grew more uncomfortable with each minute that passed. Vader tuned out the rest of the meeting, his own thoughts preoccupying him.

Now that he suspected that Leia Organa was his own child, Vader had begun to wonder about the circumstances of his wife's death. Clearly she had not died on Mustafar, as his master had told him. And then it came to him; she *had* died in childbirth, just as he had foreseen. His fists clenched in monumental anger and frustration when he considered all that he'd sacrificed to save her. And for what? His vision had come true. Even the power of the Dark Side did not have the ability to prevent it. *Another lie*, he thought darkly.

Standing up suddenly, Vader decided that he was in no mood to listen to the bureaucratic banter any longer. Without another word to anyone, he left the room with a flourish of his great black cloak.

Chapter 3

Three

Later that evening

Vader sat at the large desk that was littered with datapads. Reports, reports and more reports. He'd been working at them for almost four hours, but it had been time spent in vain. Try as he may, he had been unable to stop thinking about his daughter. And Padmé. A small flicker of hope had started in his heart, one he dare not even consider. What if she was still alive? He knew it was foolish to even think of such a possibility, but he couldn't help it.

Standing up finally, Vader sent the datapads crashing to the floor with one mighty sweep of his arm. He spied the holovision on the other side of the room and decided to catch up on the news. Activating the device with the Force, he walked over to the large leather chair that sat in front of it.

"...all to the further glory of the Empire," the announcer was saying as the picture appeared. Vader sat down in the chair, hoping for something more interesting to view. "And now to local news," the announcer continued. "A terrible accident occurred during rush hour this morning in the Museum District. At an elevation of more than one hundred meters, two speeders were involved in a horrific head on collision when the driver of one vehicle made an illegal turn onto a one way laneway."

"Idiot," Vader grumbled.

"The driver of the second speeder was killed instantly, and two passengers of the second were pronounced dead shortly after arriving at the hospital. Dead are thirty-one year old Jina Sillman of Coruscant, Beru and Owen Lars of Tatooine."

Vader sat up upon hearing these names. *Beru and Owen Lars??* He thought, thinking his audio receptors were malfunctioning. "According to acquaintances, the Lars were here on a school trip with their ten-year-old nephew, Luke Skywalker, who is in critical condition after the crash."

Vader sat absolutely still for a long time, staring at the footage of a young boy being rushed into the emergency ward. Luke Skywalker. Owen Lars. The coincidence was almost impossible to ignore. *Is Luke Skywalker my son? Can there be another explanation? If so what? If not... I have a son.* But that boy who was very likely his son was in critical condition, he soon remembered. The thought that he may lose his boy before ever setting eyes on him, before ever knowing for sure that Luke was his, filled Vader with cold terror, and he rose quickly to his feet. Without even bothering to turn off the holovision, he ran out the door and headed for the exit.

Elsewhere on Coruscant

Leia sat in the suite, flicking through the channels on the holonet. The viceroy was busy with correspondence, and Leia was on her own to find something to do. She was almost

beginning to regret bugging her father to come to Coruscant. Instead of being out and seeing the sights, she was stuck in a hotel room, or a conference room, while her father conducted his business.

The one interesting thing that had happened however was meeting Darth Vader. He had been so different than she'd imagined. Growing up in the Organa household she had heard horror stories about Vader. There was no doubt how her parents felt about him. *But he's not a monster; he's actually kind of nice. And funny.* She wondered what her parents would think if they knew about the rather unusual conversation she'd had with Vader. *They'd ground me for the rest of my childhood,* she reflected with a smirk, deciding that they must never know.

Leia suddenly stopped day dreaming as an image on the holonet caught her attention. She'd only been half listening to the report of a terrible speeder accident, but when they showed footage of a young boy being rushed into the emergency ward, she sat forward in her chair.

"That's him!" she cried. "That's the boy in my dream!! Father! Father come here quick!!"

Organa rushed into the room, expecting the worst when he heard the tone in Leia's voice. His encounter with Vader earlier that day had made him more than a little edgy. "What? What's wrong??"

"I saw that boy I've been dreaming about," she said, looking up at Bail with big eyes. "He was in a terrible accident! I felt it happen, Father! I have to go to see him!"

Organa frowned, turning his attention to the news broadcast. "Leia, you don't even know this boy," he said impatiently. "Why would we go all the way down there? They wouldn't let us see him; it would be a waste of time."

But Leia would not be put off. "Father, please!" she cried, tears filling her eyes. "I have to see him! I can't explain it... I just need to. I've dreamed of him for so long... I feel like I know him!"

Organa was perturbed by Leia's vehemence, for he knew from experience that there was something to what she was saying. "Did they say the boy's name?" he asked as an idea started to dawn on him.

Leia nodded. "Luke Skywalker," she replied.

Organa felt his stomach drop. "Are you sure?" he asked.

She nodded again. "Can we go? Please Father?? I won't be able to sleep all night if I don't see him!"

Organa realized that he really had no choice but to give in to what she wanted. He only hoped that she was not intuitive enough to put the pieces together.

Emergency Room

Vader swept into the emergency room with a sense of purpose and urgency. He garnered more than a little attention as he strode across the waiting area to the desk, but he ignored it. He had more important things to concern himself with.

The duty nurse looked up and then up again, too shocked to see the ominous figure before her to speak for a moment. So Vader spoke.

“Where is Luke Skywalker?” he asked.

“Luke Skywalker?” she asked.

“Yes, the boy who was in a speeder accident,” Vader replied impatiently. “Where is he? I must see him.”

“Let me check,” she said, checking her computer screen. ‘The boy is still in triage,’ she told him. “The doctors are...” she stopped as Vader started walking towards the set of blast doors with the triage sign above them. “Lord Vader, you can’t go in there!” she cried, jumping to her feet.

Vader stopped, but only long enough to use the Force to give the woman a firm shove back into her chair before walking through the blast doors that opened for him.

The sight that met Vader’s eyes as he entered the triage unit stopped him in his tracks. A team of medical personnel were gathered around a surgical table working frantically on their patient.

Vader watched, the fear filling him. He reached out with the Force, and was shaken by the strong Force sense he felt emanating from the boy, even in his unconscious state. He listened to the doctors, sensing their panic as they worked frantically to save the young boy.

“I need six units of plasma, stat,” the head physician shouted.

“Doctor we don’t have that much blood on hand,” a nurse informed her. “His blood type is extremely rare; we only have three units on hand!”

“This boy need surgery if he is to survive,” the doctor replied tersely. “And to perform surgery I need six units of plasma! Now find it for me, damn it!”

“What is the boy’s blood type?” Vader finally said, startling the team by his presence.

Swallowing her shock at seeing Lord Vader in her triage, the head doctor told him.

“That is my type as well,” Vader informed her. “I will donate the blood you need to perform surgery.”

The members of the team looked at one another in shock. Lord Vader was helping a stranger? An insignificant child he didn’t even know?

“Don’t just stand there gaping at one another,” Vader snapped. “Do what you need to save this boy’s life!”

His words shook the team into action. A medidroid approached Vader, indicating a nearby area where the blood bank was located. A nurse walked over to assist, syringe ready. However she was surprised that the Dark Lord even had blood, and thus had no idea where to withdraw it. Or how. Vader sensed her hesitation. Without a word he removed his shoulder armor, and then pulled open a slit that ran along the top of his left shoulder.

The nurse watched in fascination and then proceeded to first clean a small area with an antiseptic swab, and then insert the syringe into the heavy muscle of Vader’s shoulder.

Vader watched as the blood filled the bag, knowing that every moment counted if they were to save Luke's life.

"How much do you have?" the doctor asked as she prepped Luke for surgery.

The droid brought the bag over to the surgical table and prepared to process it. After ensuring that the type matched, it looked up at the surgeon. "One unit so far, Doctor," it reported.

"I need more," she replied, glancing up at the droid.

The nurse standing beside Vader looked at him. "Lord Vader may I?" she asked.

"Yes, take whatever you need," he told her. "Only save that boy's life."

The nurse nodded in understanding and proceeded to withdraw more blood. "Do you know the boy, sir?" she asked, unable to suppress her curiosity any longer.

"I believe he is my son," Vader replied.

The nurse looked up at him in undisguised shock. "Your son?" she asked.

Vader nodded. "I only learned of him today," he said. "That is why I came here, to find the truth of him."

"Perhaps you'd like me to run a paternity test while you're here," she offered.

Vader looked at her. "Yes, I would," he replied, grateful that she'd had the presence of mind to think of it. He certainly didn't.

After withdrawing two more bags of blood, which she handed off to the droid one by one, the nurse withdrew a small vial of blood in order to perform the paternity test. She withdrew the syringe, and applied some pressure to the small puncture in Vader's shoulder.

"I'll have the results in a few moments, sir," the nurse told him, and then walked over to a computer station on the far side of the room.

Vader nodded as he proceeded to replace his shoulder armor. His eyes moved back to the triage team as one of the assisting droids quickly processed the blood for the surgeon's use. *Hold on, Luke*, he thought, hoping to bolster the boy with his sheer force of will. *Don't give up.*

"Lord Vader?"

Vader turned to see the nurse standing before him. "You have the results?"

"Yes sir," she said. "The DNA matches, sir. You are the boy's father."

Vader sat without moving. And then he turned and looked at the surgical team as they worked on Luke. Without a word he stood up and walked over to stand closer, looking at the still, battered face of his son. Ten years of feeling nothing suddenly crumbled away as he simply stared at the face of his son. *My son, my child... Leia's twin... hidden from me. Both hidden from me.* He clenched his fists in anger, watching as the doctors worked diligently on his young boy.

“You must do everything to save his life,” he said at last. “I don’t care what it costs or how many personnel you require to do so.”

“We are doing our best to save him, sir,” the doctor said without looking up. “I assure you.”

“Sir, I will have to ask you to wait outside,” one of the braver nurses asked him. “It will make our job easier.”

Vader nodded, not wanting to distract her from her task. He took one last look at Luke, and then turned and left the room.

Outside the triage centre..

Leia did her best not to break into a run as she passed through the entrance to the emergency ward.

“Leia, stay with me,” Bail said as he followed her.

She looked up impatiently at him. “I need to know how he is,” she insisted. “I’ll go over and ask at the desk if they have any information.”

Organa nodded, knowing better than to argue with the girl any further. He watched as she headed to the desk, and then did a double take as he saw Darth Vader emerge from the triage center. *He knows*, he thought with a cold feeling of dread. *Force help us all...*

Vader saw Organa, and proceeded directly over to him. “A word with you, Viceroy,” he snarled in a low voice, grabbing Organa by the arm. He directed him towards a far wall where he pinned him against it by sheer physical presence.

“What is this about, Vader?” Organa asked, trying to hide his fear behind a façade of resentment.

“Spare me your righteous indignation, Viceroy,” Vader growled. “I know, you lying, stealing bastard!”

Organa’s eyes widened and he truly began to fear that Vader would crush his larynx where he stood. “I... I have no idea...” he stammered.

“I have just left the triage center where a group of surgeons are working to save the life of my son,” Vader told him. “Yes, my *son*,” he repeated when he saw the look of shock on Organa’s face.

“What has this to do with me?” Organa asked, desperately trying to find a way out of this.

“Leia is his twin,” Vader stated. ‘Isn’t she?’ he asked. When Organa made no reply Vader squeezed his arm tighter. “Isn’t she?? Tell me, damn it! And I warn you that I will know if you are lying,” he warned angrily.

Organa’s eyes looked over to the desk where Leia was speaking to the duty nurse. “Yes,” he said softly. “She is.”

Although Vader had been convinced that Leia was his daughter, hearing it confirmed was something else. He released Organa and stepped back.

“Please,” Organa said, “I love Leia like she was my own, as does my wife. Please don’t take her from us!”

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t?” Vader retorted. “I have been robbed of my children for ten years! And you have the audacity to ask me for kindness?”

“Leia is happy,” Organa said, looking over at her again. “She is well adjusted, she is well loved. What kind of a life could you possibly offer her, Vader?”

Vader said nothing for a moment. He hated to admit that Organa was right. What kind of a life could he offer a child? *But she is mine! She’s part of me... part of Padmé...*

“I will...consider your request,” Vader said at last. “But there is one thing I demand in return.”

Organa frowned, almost afraid to ask. “What is that?” he asked warily.

“I want her to know the truth,” he said. “I want her to know that I am her father. Her *real* father.”

Organa stared at Vader, unable to respond for a moment. *No, that would destroy her!! She can’t know, not ever!*

Vader could sense the man’s horror at the idea of revealing Leia’s true paternity to her, and it angered him again. “You have a choice, Viceroy,” he said. “Either you tell her, right now, or I will take her and tell her myself. What will it be?”

Organa looked over at Leia, noting with dismay that she was walking over to them. Truly he had no choice; Vader had made sure of it. “I’ll tell her,” he said quietly. “Please give us some privacy,” he added.

Vader nodded and then turned to leave. Leia was looking up at him with curiosity when he did so.

“Lord Vader!” she said. “What are you doing here?”

Vader examined her face again, marveling at how much she looked like her mother. “I... donated blood to the young boy in there,” he told her.

Leia’s eyes widened. “You did?” she asked in amazement. ‘Wow, that was really nice of you!’

“The boy is my son, Princess,” he told her.

This news shocked Leia and she was unable to hide the shock in her expression. “He’s your son?” she asked. “I... I didn’t know you had a son, Lord Vader.”

“I only found out today,” Vader told her. He glanced back at Organa. “I believe the viceroy wishes to speak with you,” he told her.

Leia looked at Bail and nodded. Vader walked away, feeling tired and slightly light headed from donating such a large quantity of blood. He sat down, deciding that, for now, all he could do was wait.

Chapter 4

Four

“Did you know that the young boy in there is Lord Vader’s son?” Leia asked Organa. “And that he just found out today??”

Organa nodded. “Yes, I know,” he replied.

Leia sensed that there was something weighing heavily on his mind. “What’s wrong, Father?” she asked him. “You’re so tense, so...scared.”

Organa sighed, his heart heavy. “Come and sit down, Leia,” he said. “I need to talk to you about something.”

Leia frowned and let him lead her to a pair of nearby chairs. Whatever it was he had to say, she sensed that it was big. Really big.

“Darth Vader wasn’t always as he is now,” Organa began.

“I know,” Leia replied. “He told me he was in a serious accident, and that is why he needs to wear that breathing apparatus.”

Organa nodded. “Yes, that’s true,” he replied. ‘He was once a Jedi Knight,’ he continued. “The greatest Jedi there ever was,” he added. “He was a great hero during the Clone Wars, a great pilot and soldier.”

Leia listened in fascination, wondering why her father felt compelled to tell her all this all of a sudden.

“Vader married a beautiful senator in secret,” Organa continued. “The Jedi weren’t allowed to be married, but he did it anyway. He never did anything the way he was expected, he’s always been a bit of a rebel, ironically enough.”

“Father, why are you telling me all this?” she couldn’t help but ask. “It’s very interesting, but why do you want me to know this?”

Organa sighed. “Let me finish,” he said. ‘Vader’s wife became pregnant, and gave birth to twins. The babies were born on the same day that Vader was injured. His wife died. The twins were taken away, taken by friends who vowed to love and protect them. That boy in there, Luke, is the son that Vader’s wife gave birth to on that day.’ He stopped, summoning the strength he needed to say what he needed to say next. “And the daughter she bore, the twin sister of that young boy is you, Leia.”

Leia stared at Organa for a moment, unsure that she’d heard him correctly. “Luke... is my brother?” she asked incredulously. “My *twin*?”

Organa nodded. “And Lord Vader... Vader is your father, Leia. Your real father.”

Leia was too stunned to say anything. *That’s why I’ve been dreaming about Luke for so long... he’s my brother, my twin brother!! And Lord Vader is our father...*

“Why did you lie to me?” she finally asked quietly. She looked up at him, accusation in her dark eyes. “You told me my father was dead!”

“We told you that to protect you, Leia,” he told her. “Darth Vader is the right hand of the emperor, a vicious, ruthless...”

“He’s my father,” she interjected. ‘And that is the most important thing. I can’t believe you lied to me,’ she said, her eyes filling with tears. “Is my mother alive too? Did you lie about that as well??” she asked, standing up and running off.

Vader sat staring at the pattern on the floor, hands clasped between his knees. He had resisted the urge to barge into the triage center again to demand an update on Luke’s condition, but decided that he would only get in the way. And the last thing he wanted to do was endanger his son’s life.

Vader looked up as he sensed someone standing close by. He looked up and was face to face with his daughter. He could see that she’d been crying, and realized that she’d been told the truth. Her reaction to it was anything but encouraging.

Leia said nothing for a moment, as she formulated what to say.

“Is there something you wish to say to me, Princess?” he asked.

Leia nodded. “Father, that is, the viceroy told me the truth,” she told him. “He told me that you’re my father, my real father.”

Vader looked at her for a long time before responding. “Yes,” he said at last. “I am.”

Leia frowned. “Why did they lie to me?” she said. ‘They told me my real father was dead.’ She stopped as something occurred to her. “Is that why you were asking me about my parents yesterday?”

Vader nodded.

“So why didn’t you just tell me who you are?” she asked.

“I wasn’t certain you were my child until today,” he told her. “I believed you had died with your mother.”

“That’s why you didn’t know about Luke, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Vader told her. ‘For the past ten years I have believed that your mother died before you were born,’ he told her. “I was lied to,” he added, unable to keep the anger from his voice. “And you and your brother were hidden from me.”

“Until today,” Leia said.

“Yes, until today,” Vader agreed.

Leia sighed and sat down beside him, thoughtful for a moment. “That’s why I felt it when Luke had his accident,” she reflected. “Because we’re twins.”

“You are connected through the Force,” Vader told her. “Just as you are both connected to me. The Force runs strongly in your veins, Leia. You and Luke are both strong with it, only your abilities have never been encouraged, your skills neglected.”

Leia could sense how resentful and angry her father was, and couldn't blame him. He had been robbed of ten years with both his children, and lied to. This brought up another question, and she looked up at him. "Who lied to you about my mother?" she asked.

"The emperor," he replied, the anger plain in his voice. "He told me she had died, and blamed me for her death."

"But... you had nothing to do with her death," she said. "My father told me that she died when Luke and I were born. Why would he do that?"

Vader was not prepared to tell his young daughter about the horrific incident on Mustafar; that would only make it more difficult for her to accept all of this. "The emperor has reasons for everything he does," he replied at last. "You are too young to understand, child. Perhaps one day I will explain it all to you."

Leia resented being called a child, but decided it would be unwise to complain. Besides, there was a more pressing matter she needed to discuss with her new found father. "So, what are you going to do?" she asked him. "Now that you've found Luke and me, what are you going to do?"

"Luke is an orphan now," he replied. "His guardians were killed in the crash. I will take him into my home."

"And what about me?" she asked.

Vader sensed that she was nervous and even a little frightened to hear what he was going to say. "You are happy with the Organas," he stated.

"Yes," she admitted, looking down at her hands in her lap. "They're the only parents I've ever known."

Vader hesitated before replying, and then stopped as he saw the surgeon approaching. He stood up at once, followed by Leia.

"How is he? How is my son?" Vader asked.

"He's out of danger," the surgeon reported, "and is being moved to the critical care unit. The surgery was a success. The blood you donated has restored his own volume which will work towards helping his body recovering from the shock it sustained."

"The damage was significant," Vader stated grimly.

"I'm afraid so," the surgeon replied. "Aside from the external injuries, he had serious internal hemorrhaging that had caused his body to go into shock. We managed to stop it, and we're optimistic that he will stabilize soon."

"Can we see him?" Leia asked.

The surgeon looked at her, and then back up at Vader.

"This is Luke's twin sister," Vader explained. "My daughter, Leia."

"Oh... well in that case, yes I suppose you may go in with your father," the surgeon said, stunned that Lord Vader had not just one but two children. "But I'll have to ask you to keep your visit short," she added.

“Understood,” Vader replied. “Proceed,” he added.

The surgeon led Vader and Leia to another set of blast doors that opened into a long corridor. After a few moments she entered a room, and Vader felt his daughter’s anguish upon seeing her long lost twin lying so still and pale on the bed. He felt it as well, in addition to a healthy dose of anger that this had happened.

Leia approached the bed to look at Luke. His face was still rather battered, and bore several bandages.

“Once he has stabilized he will undergo bacta treatment,” the surgeon informed them. “He’s simply too weak right now. I’ll leave you alone for now,” she added, and then left them.

Vader nodded in understanding, his eyes never leaving the bed where Leia was holding her brother’s hand; the first contact the twins had made since the day they were born. Vader realized that he was not the only one who had been robbed; Luke and Leia had been too. They had been robbed of one another for ten years; and yet even so, Vader knew that there would be a strong bond between them once they got acquainted.

“He’s just like I imagined him to be,” Leia said, not taking her eyes from Luke’s face.

“You’ve had visions of him?” Vader asked.

“I’ve dreamed about him, if that’s what you mean,” she replied. ‘I’ve had dreams that I have a younger brother for years, and every time it was Luke I saw.’ She smiled. “I guess he could be my older brother though, really,” she mused.

Vader said nothing, hating the fact that he didn’t even know his children’s birth order.

“I can’t wait to get to know him,” Leia said. ‘I have so many questions, so many things I want to know.’ She frowned, and then looked up at Vader. “I will get the chance to get to know him, won’t I?” she asked.

“Of course,” Vader replied. “Why wouldn’t you?”

Leia wasn’t quite sure how to put into words what she needed to say. She was torn and confused, not knowing what turn her life would take now that she knew the truth about the secret family she never knew about. “You never answered my question,” she said. “Are you going to take me from my adoptive parents?”

“You were taken from me, Leia,” he said. “You belong with me, with Luke. Surely you can see that.”

Leia nodded. “Does my adoptive father know?” she asked quietly.

“No, but I’m certain he has considered the possibility,” he replied. “Why else would he have worked so diligently to keep you hidden from me? He knew that I would claim you should I ever find you.”

Leia didn’t reply, and turned to look at Luke. As much as she wanted to be with him, the thought of saying goodbye to the only parents she had ever known was immensely painful to her.

Vader could sense how she felt, the confusion and turmoil that raged within her. She would learn to accept it, he decided. She had no choice.

"I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave now," a nurse said as she came into the room. "Doctor's orders."

"Very well," Vader replied reluctantly. "Come, Leia," he said.

Leia nodded, and then bent and gave Luke a kiss on the cheek as Vader walked over to the other side of the bed. *Rest now, my son*, he thought as he pushed the blond locks from his son's brow. *Soon we will be together.*

Leia watched as her father, his tenderness surprising her. After listening to her adoptive parents decry Darth Vader for years, she never would have imagined him possible of such a thing. *But he has lived the past ten years in sadness and loneliness*, she reminded herself; *he's had no one to love, no one to love him.*

Vader looked up at his daughter, her thoughts reaching him as clearly as though she had spoken them aloud. He had no idea how to respond to such a pure and innocent declaration, so he said nothing. Leia followed him as he headed for the door, knowing that her life would never be the same again.

Chapter 5

Five

Bail Organa paced up and down in the waiting room, more nervous than he had ever been. *What if Vader takes her?* He worried. Vader would be perfectly within his legal rights to do so, not to mention the fact that he was the second most powerful man in the galaxy. He could do whatever he wanted. In addition, Vader was angry, very angry; *but can I blame him? Wouldn't any man be in his position?*

Organa looked over as Vader and Leia entered the waiting room. He could see by the way Leia was looking at him that there was something pressing on her mind.

"How is Luke?" he asked, looking at Leia.

"He's still unconscious," she told him.

Organa nodded. "I imagine he will be sedated for a while," he said. 'Maybe we ought to get back to the hotel,' he suggested. "It's very late."

Leia looked up at Vader, wondering when he was going to drop the proverbial bomb. He looked down at her. "Leia, go and ask the nurse about visiting hours," he told her. "There is a matter I need to discuss with the Viceroy," Vader said. She nodded; glad to have a reason not to be present for this particular conversation.

Once Leia had walked away, Organa looked up at Vader, his mouth going dry. "What is it?" he asked.

"I have decided that my daughter belongs with me," Vader said without preamble. "She will come to live with me and Luke effective immediately."

Organa's face turned ashen. "You... you said you'd consider my request!" he cried.

"I did consider it," Vader retorted. 'This is my decision, Viceroy, like it or not. If you wish me to involve the courts, I will be most willing to do so,' he added. "I'm sure that they would look with leniency upon the kidnapping of my child," he added.

"You monster," Organa seethed. "You'd rip this child from the family who loves her, the family that has raised her, the family..."

"You dare to tell me that *I* am ripping her from her family?" Vader snarled, taking a step closer to him. 'It was *you* that stole *my* child, Viceroy,' he growled. "It was *you* who has deprived her of her twin and her real father for ten years," he added. "Do not dare to accuse me of wrong doing."

"No, attempting to kill your pregnant wife was an act of kindness," Organa was unable to resist saying. He regretted it immediately when he felt Vader's invisible, vice like grip upon his windpipe.

"You will return to Alderaan," Vader said. "And have Leia's things packed and sent here without delay," he told him and then released him suddenly, sending Organa falling to his knees, gasping for air.

"Leia... let her say goodbye," he gasped. "Her mother will be heartbroken."

Vader clenched his fists, the irony of his statement hitting him hard. "What kind of a fool do you think I am," he snarled. "Do you really think I'd allow you to take her back there? Once you had her away from me she'd conveniently just disappear once more," he stated.

"I will bring her back," Organa insisted. "I swear it."

Vader didn't believe him for a moment, and folded his arms over his chest.

"Please let me go and say goodbye."

Both men turned and saw Leia standing behind Vader. She had heard the last exchange, and looked up at Vader with eyes that reminded him of her mother.

"I promise to return," she insisted. 'I... I want to return,' she added, glancing at Organa. "Please let me go and say goodbye," she said, looking up at Vader again. She tentatively took his hand. "Please?"

Vader looked down at her, the expression in her eyes going straight to his heart. He didn't like the way she was able to do that so easily, and he began to wonder if he knew what he was getting into.

"Very well," he said. 'But I will send one of my men to accompany you,' he added, looking back at Organa. "To ensure that no one....delays your return."

Leia sensed that this compromise was very difficult to make for Vader, and she nodded. "Thank you," she said.

"Very well," Organa replied, realizing that this was all he could expect. "Will you permit her to return to the hotel with me tonight?" he asked.

"That is acceptable," Vader replied. "I don't think I need to remind you what would happen should you try to abscond with her," he added.

Organa shook his head. "No, you don't," he replied. He looked down at Leia, who still held Vader's hand. "Come along, Leia," he said.

Leia looked up at Vader. "Will you remain here tonight?" she asked him.

"Yes," Vader replied. "I will not sleep until Luke is stable."

"I don't think I will either," Leia replied. "The nurse said we can visit any time we want," she added.

Vader nodded, not surprised by the generosity of the staff. "I'll be here when you return, Leia," he told her. "Try to get some sleep."

"I'll try," Leia replied. "Goodnight," she added. She released his hand and then walked over to join the viceroy, who took her hand and turned away from Vader without another word.

Vader watched them go, and then activated his comlink.

"Captain Kassel," he said.

"Yes Lord Vader?"

"I want you to send two of your most reliable men to the Imperial Suites Hotel," he said. "I want Viceroy Organa watched his every move. Should he try to leave the planet, I want you to kill him and bring the child to me. She is not to be harmed under any circumstances."

"Understood, sir," Kassel replied. "I'll take care of it right away."

"Good," Vader replied. "I will not be returning tonight. Cancel any meetings I have tomorrow, tell them I'm...indisposed."

"Of course sir," Kassel replied. "Goodnight then, sir."

Vader ended the transmission and then returned to chair where he had been sitting earlier. He was exhausted and his head ached incessantly; but this did not deter him. He would remain here until he knew that his son was stable, until the boy woke up. Luke would no doubt be devastated to learn of the death of his guardians. It was Vader's hope that learning that his father was alive would help him through it.

Elsewhere on Coruscant

Leia was quiet on the ride back to the hotel, lost in thought. Her life had changed so much in such a short time that she'd barely had a chance to assimilate it all. The brother she'd always wanted, the brother she'd dreamed of for years turned out to be real. Not only that, their father, the father who everyone had told her was dead, was very much alive. Alive and the most notorious man in the galaxy. The logical part of Leia could understand why she and Luke had been hidden from Vader. He was the right hand of the emperor, and responsible for many atrocities. His reputation was well known and well deserved. She understood all that, she could see why someone would hide babies from such a man, even if they were his babies. However, the emotional part of Leia was outraged by the lie, and by the fact that she and Luke had been split up at birth and raised apart. She was outraged that her real father had lived for ten years believing his family was dead, and felt certain that the pain of this loss had contributed a great deal to the man he had become.

According to her adoptive father, Vader had once been a Jedi, and had loved her mother enough to defy the Jedi rule forbidding marriage. *Surely if he were capable of that kind of love once there must still be good in him*, Leia reflected. *There is good in him, I've felt it. Perhaps having Luke and me in his life will change him; perhaps he can become that man again that he was before we were born.*

"Your mother will be devastated," Organa said at last. "I don't know how I'm going to tell her this."

Leia looked at him. "Didn't you ever think that he would find out the truth?" she asked.

Organa frowned. "It was our hope that he wouldn't," he replied. "But obviously we underestimated him."

Leia sighed. "I wonder," she said thoughtfully.

Organa glanced at her. “What do you wonder?” he asked.

Leia gathered her thoughts for a moment before responding. “I wonder if Luke and I had been with him all along, would he be like he is? I mean, all scary and stuff?”

Organa made no reply at first, for he had his own opinion on the subject. Yoda and Obi-Wan had both expressed tremendous fear of the twins being discovered by their father; both felt certain that he would turn them over to the emperor. Organa shared this fear. And now that Vader had found both of his children that fear may very well be realized.

“Father?”

Organa looked at her, knowing that she was waiting for a response. “I don’t know, Leia,” he said at last. “Your father was a dangerous, violent man even before the accident he had. If your mother had been unable to turn him away from the Dark Side, I’m not sure anyone could.”

This was not the response that Leia had been hoping for. She frowned, reminding herself that Bail Organa hated Vader, and that anything he said about him would be tainted by that hatred. “I don’t agree,” she said at last. “I think having Luke and me in his life *will* change him.”

Organa said nothing in response, and simply continued to fly the speeder to the hotel, trying not to think about what the future would hold.

Chapter 6

Six

"Something wonderful has happened... Ani, I'm pregnant."

"That's....that's wonderful!"

"What are we going to do?"

"We're not going to worry about anything. This is a happy moment, the happiest moment of my life."

Darth Vader had not thought of that day in ten years, but now the memories of it would not let up. He remembered vividly how anxious his wife had been, how scared. They had kept their marriage a secret for three years, but keeping a child secret would have been impossible. But he had not been worried; he'd decided by the end of that day that he would gladly sacrifice his career as a Jedi in order to be a father to his child. And then that night, the dreams had begun... the horrifying visions that would change his life forever. *I tried to save her, but I couldn't... I sacrificed everything, but I lost her anyway... you lied to me, Sidious, you told me that the Dark Side would save her, you told me that that was the only way to prevent her from dying... and yet she died anyway... didn't she?*

"Lord Vader?"

Vader looked up, shaken from his reverie by the voice.

"You have news of my son?" he asked.

"Yes sir," the nurse replied. "He's awake."

Vader stood up at once. "I want to see him," he said.

"Of course," the nurse said. "Follow me, please."

Luke was very weak as he lay in the hospital bed. He was very groggy, and was quite disoriented. The pain killers had kept him comfortable, but he was aware that there was something very wrong.

"How are you feeling, young man?" the nurse asked as she checked Luke's vitals.

"Not great," Luke murmured. He tried to look around the room, but even that much effort was painful. "Where's Uncle Owen? And Aunt Beru?"

The nurse frowned, and sat on the edge of the bed. "I'm afraid they didn't make it, Luke," she said gently. "You were the only one to survive the crash."

Luke's eyes widened at this disclosure. "You mean... they're dead?" he asked.

"I'm so sorry," the nurse said, putting a hand on Luke's shoulder. "You were lucky to survive yourself, Luke."

But Luke wasn't listening. He felt numb on inside as his eyes filled with tears, despite his efforts to keep them at bay. "It's my fault," he said quietly as the tears spilled down his face. "I bugged them to come here; they only came because they were worried about me! It's all my fault!!"

"Don't say that, Luke," the nurse said. "You mustn't blame yourself."

"But it is my fault," Luke insisted, looking up at her. 'If I hadn't pestered them to let me come on this trip they'd still be alive! If only I'd...' "he stopped as his eyes were drawn to the doorway, where an orderly had entered followed by the last person in the galaxy Luke had ever expected to see: Darth Vader. He looked back at the nurse, starting to panic, starting to wonder if somehow he was in some sort of trouble." What is he doing here?' he whispered as Vader approached the bed. "Am I in trouble??"

The nurse looked over her shoulder as Vader approached and then back at Luke. "No, it's nothing like that," she assured him. "I think I ought to let him tell you why he's here," she added as she stood up.

Luke had to stop himself from grabbing the nurse's hand and begging her to stay, so frightened was he of being alone with the Dark Lord. He'd heard stories about Vader, and had seen holos of him on occasion. His uncle and aunt had told him little of the Dark Lord, but Luke had heard plenty at school. And what he'd heard was enough to terrify him. But nothing could have prepared him for meeting Vader up close and personal as he was about to do.

Vader stood beside the bed for a moment, sensing his son's fear. He had no idea what to say to the boy who was watching him with large blue eyes that were identical to his own. *He's terrified*, Vader realized grimly. Tentatively Vader moved closer to the bed, and sat on the chair beside it, simply looking at his son for what seemed to Luke to be an eternity.

"My uncle and aunt are dead," Luke said at last, not knowing what else to say. "So if I'm in some sort of trouble, I..."

"You're not in trouble," Vader said, startling the boy with the deep, menacing timbre of his voice.

Luke relaxed, but only marginally, and merely stared up into the black orbs of Vader's mask, waiting for him to offer an explanation for his presence.

"I'm...sorry about your guardians," Vader said at last.

Luke nodded, the sorrow welling up within him once more. Vader felt it clearly, and his heart ached for his son. Clearly Luke had loved Owen and Beru; they had been the closest thing to parents he'd ever had. *Until now...*

"You must be wondering why I'm here," Vader said.

Luke simply nodded.

"I'm here to..." Vader was interrupted by the surgeon who had come to check on Luke.

"Oh, excuse me Lord Vader," she said. 'I'm just here to check on young Luke here.' She looked over the computer screen that was hooked to Luke's monitor. "Looks like you're coming along nicely," she said. "You're a lucky young man, Luke," she continued. "If it weren't for the blood Lord Vader donated, you wouldn't have made it through the surgery."

Luke looked up at Vader in surprise. "You donated blood?" he asked in astonishment and confusion.

Vader simply nodded.

"Why?" Luke asked.

"Because I have the same blood type," Vader said, not wishing to get into a personal conversation with the doctor present.

"You do?" Luke asked with a frown. "I mean... why would you donate blood to me? You don't know me; I'm just a kid from a back water planet. I'm not important," he concluded quietly.

Vader said nothing for a moment, and then looked at the surgeon. She didn't need him to say anything, and immediately made a flimsy excuse for leaving once more, leaving Vader alone with his son.

"You're wrong, Luke," Vader told his son, sitting on the side of his bed. "You are very important, far more important than you have ever known, than you have ever been told."

Luke looked up at him, confused. "I don't understand," he said. "How am I important? Especially to someone like you?" he added, casting his eyes downward once more.

His son's poor self esteem angered Vader, for he realized that Owen had no doubt kept the boy passive as a means of keeping a lid on the boy's innate abilities.

"There is no one in the universe more important to me than you are, Luke," Vader said at last, lifting the boy's chin with one finger so that they were face to face. "No one. You are my son, Luke; the child that I believed had died years ago, the child that has been hidden from me since the day you were born."

An awkward silence ensued as father and son simply stared at one another. "You're my *father*?" Luke said at last, his voice betraying his incredulity.

Vader nodded.

"How? How can you be my father?" Luke cried in confusion. "Uncle Owen told me that my father died! That he was a navigator on a spice freighter!"

Vader shook his head. "Your uncle told you that to keep you hidden from me," he said. "I only learned that you were alive yesterday, Luke. I believed you had died with your mother ten years ago, before you were even born. You've been hidden from me since the day you were born, you and your twin sister."

Luke was too stunned to say anything for a moment. "I... have a twin sister?" he managed at last.

"Yes," Vader replied. "Her name is Leia. She knew nothing of you until yesterday, although she's been dreaming about you for years."

Luke was starting to feel overwhelmed and utterly exhausted. Too much information in such a short time was making his head spin, and in his present condition that wasn't a good thing. Vader could sense his son's rising anxiety level and became concerned.

“You need to rest now, Son,” he said, putting a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “I know this is a lot for you to deal with all at once, but I want to promise you that you will be well cared for. Now that I have found you, I won’t let anyone ever harm you again.”

Luke only heard half of what his father was saying, for he’d begun to drift back into a sedative induced sleep. Vader stood up and watched his son as he slept, an unfamiliar feeling filling him. It had been ten years since he’d felt anything that wasn’t tainted with darkness, and the feelings startled him. He had not expected this; to learn in a few short days that he had not one but two children, a son and a daughter... it was overwhelming. And it made him begin to question everything he had lived by for the past ten years, including, and most especially, his fealty to the emperor.

The thoughts of how to deal with the emperor filled his mind as Vader left his son’s room. It was fortunate that Palpatine was off world during all of this, for Vader wasn’t certain that he could hide the twins from him under the present circumstances. In fact, he wasn’t certain he could hide them at all. How could he possibly explain the fact that two ten year old children, one of whom looked just as he himself had at that age, the other like his wife, had suddenly come to live with him? Palpatine was no fool; he would know exactly who they were. And once he did...*no, I will never allow him to take them from me, not now, not ever*, he vowed, clenching his fists in determination. But how to hide them? Perhaps hiding them was not the approach to take, he mused; perhaps only hiding a part of them, the part that the emperor would care most about, was the best course of action. Palatine would only feel threatened by Luke and Leia if he believed them to be as strong as their father once was in the Force. But what if he believed they had no such power? What if he believed that they were like their mother, a non-Force sensitive? Would that make their presence in Vader’s life acceptable? Vader frowned under his mask as he wrestled with this dilemma, and nearly ran into his young daughter as he entered the waiting area.

“Leia,” he said, stopping short. “I... I wasn’t expecting to see you here so early.”

“I couldn’t sleep,” she told him. “I was worried about Luke. Have you seen him? Is he awake yet?”

“I was in with him just now,” Vader told her. “He was awake, but only for a short time. It seems he will be fine, but is on pain killers right now.”

Leia nodded. “Did you tell him?” she asked.

“Yes, he knows the truth now,” Vader told her. “About both of us.”

“How did he react?” she asked.

“He was shocked, of course,” Vader replied. “He, like you, had been told lies about his parents, and had no idea he had a twin sister. He is in something of a state of shock over the death of his guardians as well.”

“Poor Luke,” Leia sighed. “He’s going to need a lot of support to get through this.”

Vader nodded, grateful that she was like her mother. Support had never been one of his strong suits. “Where is the viceroy?” he asked.

“At the hotel,” she told him. “He was contacting my mother when I left. I guess he’s telling her about all this.”

“Yes, no doubt,” he said. “You came here alone? Unescorted?” he asked, the disapproval clear in his voice.

“No, Captain Antilles brought me,” she said, indicating a uniformed man on the other side of the room. Leia was silent for a moment as she formulated the question she wanted to ask. “Do you think there’s any chance my mother is alive? My real mother?” she asked.

Vader was taken aback by her question. It was not something he wanted to consider, for the possibility had crossed his own mind. He refused to let himself dwell on it however; the disappointment was too much to bear. “No,” he said. “There is no chance.”

Leia frowned, reminding Vader of Padmé in the look of determination in her dark eyes. “How can you be so sure?” she asked. “They lied to me about you being dead; they lied to you about Luke and me being dead. Why wouldn’t they have lied about this too?”

Vader hated to crush his daughter’s hopes; but neither could he allow her to have false ones. He knew all too well what that was like, and he would not allow her to suffer that. “Do not place your hopes on such things, young one,” he told her. “It will only lead to disappointment when they don’t happen.”

Leia regarded her father, sensing in him a great deal of deep seated pain. She began to realize that it was his own hopes as much as hers that he daren’t allow to be raised. “You loved her a lot, didn’t you?” she asked.

Vader was silent for a moment, the question filling him with emotions he’d long since learned to repress. But now this child, this veritable replica of Padmé, was forcing him to examine those emotions and face them head on. “Your mother was my very soul,” he told her at last. “Losing her was like losing part of myself.”

Leia felt a surge of emotion at his words, and she began to develop a greater understanding of this enigma who was her father. “Don’t give up hope,” she told him. ‘Maybe she’s out there, somewhere,’ she said. “Maybe...”

“Stop it,” he said sharply. “Don’t even think it. She is gone, and that is that.”

Leia was taken aback for a moment by his vehemence, but said no more. An awkward silence ensued between father and daughter as neither one quite knew what to say next.

“Do you think I could go in and see Luke?” she asked at last.

“Good idea,” he replied, relieved that she had changed the subject. “Come with me.”

Luke was in a semi-conscious state when Leia and Vader entered his room. A medidroid was at his side. Leia went at once to her brother’s side, looking down at his face with concern.

“Luke? Can you hear me?” Leia asked.

Luke’s eyelids fluttered lazily and then he opened his eyes and looked up. For a moment the twins merely looked at one another, as though reconnecting after being apart for so long.

“Hi,” Leia said at last, giving him a smile. “I’m Leia. I’m your twin sister.”

“Hi,” Luke replied weakly. He looked over to where Vader stood watching his children interact. “He told you?”

Leia nodded. "You know, I've been having dreams about you for years," she told him. "It's like I knew you were out there somewhere. Weird, huh?"

"Yeah, weird," Luke agreed.

"I'm sorry about your guardians," Leia continued. "Were you close?"

Luke nodded, willing himself not to cry.

"I guess we're going to live with our father now," Leia told him, glancing over at Vader.

"Are you an orphan too?" Luke asked.

Leia looked back at him. "No," she told him. "I have... adoptive parents," she explained.

"Won't you miss them?" Luke asked.

It was Leia's turn to be strong. "Yes," she said softly. "Very much. But we belong together, the three of us," she hastened to add. "We're family, Luke. Now we can finally be one, just as we were meant to be."

Luke wasn't so sure about his sister's optimism, for he was still more than a little frightened of their father. But obviously Leia had spent more time with Vader, and obviously she had come to accept him as her father. If they were to be a family, it would no doubt be an unusual one.

"We are going to begin your bacta treatments now, Master Skywalker," the medidroid spoke up. "You have stabilized nicely."

"That is good news," Vader said, stepping forward. "We should leave," he said to Leia, putting a hand on her shoulder.

Leia nodded, and then looked down at Luke. "We'll see you soon," she said.

"Okay," Luke replied, and watched as his new found sister and father left the room. He then looked up at the droid. "Is this gonna hurt?" he asked.

As they entered the waiting area, Vader's comlink sounded. He activated it and read a text message from Captain Kassel, telling him that the emperor had tried to contact him at his residence that morning. A cold feeling of anxiety swept over Vader as he suddenly remembered how complicated things were about to get.

"I have to leave for a while," he told his daughter. "I have some duties to attend to."

Leia nodded her understanding. "I think we're going to Alderaan tonight," she told him. "My father is just wrapping up a few things before we leave."

It irritated Vader to hear Leia refer to Bail Organa as her father, but reasoned that it was out of habit that she did so. *Soon enough she would fall out of the habit, he reasoned, once she's away from the Organas for good.*

"Then I suppose we shall see one another in two days' time," he said.

Leia nodded. "Yes," she said. "Hopefully Luke will be able to leave the hospital by then."

“Perhaps,” Vader replied, sensing that she was rather apprehensive about living alone with him. “Have a safe voyage,” he added, and then turned to leave.

“Goodbye!” she called after him as he started to walk away.

Vader stopped, and turned back to her. “I will see you in a few days,” he said again, and then turned and walked away.

Leia frowned. *He didn't even say goodbye*, she thought. *This is not going to be easy*, she realized, fighting against the anxiety she'd managed to master up to this point.

Chapter 7

Seven

Vader returned to his rather large home which was situated in a very exclusive apartment complex in Coruscant. He'd had the chance to live within the complex formally known as Republic Boulevard, but had declined. Living in the same building where he had once lived with his beloved wife would have been too difficult. The emperor had accused him of being weak, claiming that Amidala still had too much influence over him. Vader had denied it, and had never spoken of her again. But now that the children she had borne him had been discovered, Vader would have no choice but to do so.

"Lord Vader, there are several issues that require your attention," Captain Kassel said as Vader entered the apartment.

Vader swept past the man, ignoring him almost completely.

"Lord Vader!" Kassel said as he hurried after his commander.

"I heard you," Vader replied without turning to the man. 'I must make contact with the emperor before I do anything,' he said. "Viceroy Organa is planning on returning to Alderaan tonight. Be sure your men follow him there."

"Understood, Sir."

Vader proceeded to the office where he immediately made contact with the emperor via holo-communication.

"Lord Vader, how kind of you to return my message," Palpatine began.

"Forgive me, my master," Vader began contritely. "There have been some rather startling events that have occupied my time lately."

Palpatine frowned. "What are you talking about?" he demanded.

Vader had thought long and hard about his course of action, and though he'd already decided upon a course of action, he was now questioning the decision he'd made. And yet, he really had no choice.

"I have learned recently that my children are alive," Vader began.

Palpatine made no reply immediately, giving Vader reason to grow fearful.

"Go on," the emperor said at last.

"My son, Luke, was recently in a serious speeder accident in which his guardians were killed," Vader explained. "And my daughter, Leia, was at a meeting with Viceroy Organa, the man who has been calling himself her father for ten years. They were hidden from me, Master, stolen from me."

The scowl on Palpatine's face seemed to engulf the entirety of his ancient visage. "And let me guess, you intend to reclaim them," he said in a mocking tone. "Welcome them home like the loving father. Is that it?"

"They are my children, Master," Vader stated. "I have a right to them. I believed that they died when..." he stopped, coming dangerously close to mentioning the name of his wife.

"When you killed their mother?" Palpatine filled in the rest of the sentence.

Vader hesitated before replying. "Clearly there is some... discrepancy," he said carefully.

"Are you questioning me, Vader?" Palpatine challenged.

Vader wasn't certain how to respond, for that was exactly what he was doing.

"How do you know that these children are even yours?" Palpatine continued.

"A paternity test was performed with a sample of Luke's blood," Vader replied. "And Organa admitted to me that Leia was my child."

Palpatine was silent for a long time after hearing this. Too long.

"You do realize that Skywalker's offspring pose a threat to us," the emperor said at last. "If they are as powerful as he was..."

"They have no Force abilities," Vader replied at once. "They are their mother's children as well, Master, and she had no such abilities."

Palpatine did not believe this for a moment, but he nodded as though he did. "Very well," he said, his own plans starting to form in his mind. "You may claim them, Vader."

"Thank you, my master," Vader replied. "I will begin having arrangements made at once for their accommodations here in my home."

Palpatine nodded. "My stay here has been prolonged unavoidably," he said. "But I do look forward to meeting the twins very soon," he added.

Vader simply bowed in response, the thought of presenting Luke and Leia to the emperor making his blood run cold. He waited for the emperor to end the transmission and then left the office.

"Captain Kassel come here," he said into his comlink.

Kassel appeared at once. "Yes my lord?"

"I want you to find the best contractor in the city," Vader said. "I need two of these unused rooms converted into living spaces for my twins."

Kassel was smart enough to hide his shock and simply nodded. "Bedrooms sir?"

"Yes, freshers, computers, clothing, every amenity they will need," Vader replied. "They are ten years old, one of each gender. Arrange for comfortable accommodations for them. I want them finished in forty-eight hours, I don't care what it costs."

"Understood sir," Kassel replied. "I'll get right on it."

Vader nodded, racking his brain for everything else he'd need to arrange. "Oh... school," he said as Kassel was about to walk away. 'Find out about school, the best private school on Coruscant,' he said. "And arrange a meeting for me to meet the head master."

"Yes sir," Kassel said. "Anything else?"

Vader thought for a moment. "I can't think of anything at the moment," he admitted. "But if I do I will contact you."

"Very good sir," Kassel replied. He waited to be dismissed and then went on his way, his day suddenly having become very busy.

Alderaan

Breha Organa had not stopped crying in days. The message from her husband two days earlier had utterly destroyed her. *Vader knows... he's taking Leia... my Leia.*

Breha's emotions had run the gamut over the past forty-eight hours from anger to fear, from denial to hysteria. *Why does he want her? How can he possibly expect she will be happy with him? Does he even care if she's happy?* Breha had decided that Vader only cared about revenge and that he was merely using Leia as a means to exact it. *Poor Leia*, Breha thought sadly. *My poor sweet Leia...*

Looking up, Breha watched as her husband's ship appeared in the distance. She stood up and waited for it to land, the feeling of anxiety welling up within her.

"The Viceroy and the Princess have just landed, your Majesty," a handmaiden announced.

"I know," Breha replied quietly.

The maid didn't know what was going on, and was confused by the queen's mood. She curtsied respectfully and then left Breha, who sat back down on the stone bench and waited. She didn't have to wait long. Without a word, Leia ran out onto the balcony and into Breha's arms. Breha embraced her wordlessly, the tears spilling out of her eyes and down her face. *This is where I first held her*, Breha reflected; *I was sitting in this very spot when Bail placed her in my arms for the first time... she was only a hours old...*

Leia could feel the queen's sorrow. She had told herself not to cry, knowing that it would only make things worse. But now, now that she was in her mother's warm embrace, her resolve began to waver.

"It will be alright, Leia," Breha said, her words sounding empty even to her own ears. "You and Luke will finally be together."

Leia pulled back and nodded. "He's exactly as I'd dreamed," she told Breha. "I already feel so close to him."

Breha nodded, stroking Leia's dark hair. "That's wonderful," she said. "You two will be close, I just know it."

"Lord Vader isn't the monster you think he is," Leia told Breha. "He really cares about me and Luke. He is so full of pain and sadness. I think that's why he acts the way he does."

Breha said nothing in response, not wanting to dampen Leia's feelings of hope. "I hope you'll be happy with him, Leia," she said at last, her voice cracking with emotion.

"Please don't cry," Leia said, her own emotions threatening to get the better of her. "I will visit, I promise."

Breha nodded, knowing that there was very little chance that Vader would ever allow such a thing.

Just then Bail walked out onto the balcony. Breha looked up at him, seeing in his eyes the same emotions that she was struggling with.

"Leia, honey, go inside and help Mariel pack your things," Bail said.

Leia looked over at him and nodded. She nodded and left them, sensing that they wanted to be alone to discuss the situation.

"I'm sorry," Bail said, sitting down beside his wife. "I'm so sorry. I never should have brought her to that meeting; I never should have let her come to Coruscant at all."

Breha took his hand. "It's not your fault," she assured him. "We've known all along that this was a possibility. I suppose neither of us ever expected it would happen, though," she concluded tearfully.

Bail said nothing in response, and merely wrapped his arms around his wife as they both wept.

Coruscant

"You're looking much better today, Luke," the duty nurse said as she entered the room. "The bacta treatments really worked wonders. How are you feeling?"

"Pretty good," Luke replied. "Hungry though," he added.

"That's a good sign," she told him. "What would you like?"

Luke was not accustomed to being able to choose whatever he wanted to eat, for normally food was merely placed before him and he ate it. Actually having a choice was very new to him, and he hesitated, not even knowing what to say.

"Uh... do you have bantha stew?" he asked tentatively.

The nurse smiled. "I can check," she said. "Anything else?"

"Anything is okay, really," Luke told her. "Thanks."

"I'll see what I can come up with," she told him and then left the room. She encountered Darth Vader in the corridor.

"Good morning, Lord Vader," the nurse said, forcing a smile. She had not quite become accustomed to seeing the Dark Lord up close, and was still having trouble believing he was actually Luke's biological father.

"How is my boy?" Vader asked.

"He's doing much better today," she told him. "I'm just off to get him some breakfast."

"The bacta treatments were successful?" he asked.

"Very much so," she replied. "I think you'll see a big improvement in him."

Vader nodded, hoping she was right. He said no more to her and proceeded to Luke's room.

Luke looked up as the door opened, half expecting the nurse to be returning. But when he saw his father, he gave him a shy smile. "Hi," he said.

"How are you feeling?" Vader asked as he walked over to stand beside Luke's bed. He looked at his son, noting how much better he looked. Luke had more color in his face, and had far more energy.

"Pretty good," Luke replied. "The nurse is getting me some breakfast."

Vader nodded. "A good appetite is a positive sign," he commented.

"Well, my appetite is usually good," Luke admitted. 'Aunt Beru says I have hollow legs,' he added. A look of sadness passed through his brilliant eyes as he remembered that his Aunt Beru was gone now. "I miss her," he said quietly. "I miss them both."

"I know," Vader replied. "Losing someone you love is one of life's most painful lessons."

Luke studied his father's expressionless visage. "You've lost people you love?" he asked.

"Yes," Vader replied.

Luke wanted to ask him more, but the nurse returned at this point with a tray of food. "It isn't bantha stew," she said as she approached Luke's bed, "but it's the closest thing to it I could find."

Luke smiled. "Looks great," he said. "Thanks."

"Enjoy," the nurse replied, watching him with a smile.

"How soon before Luke can leave the hospital?" Vader asked her.

"I couldn't answer that, sir," she replied. "His attending physician would be the one to ask. She'll be making her rounds soon," she told him.

Vader nodded his understanding as he watched his son dig into his breakfast. He was reminded of himself at that same age, having just become a padawan under the tutelage of Obi-Wan Kenobi. It had been a difficult adjustment for a boy of nine, but he'd done it. *And so will Luke*, he thought.

"Did you eat breakfast?" Luke asked once the nurse had left them.

"I don't eat," Vader told him. "Not in the way you do."

Luke frowned. "Why not?"

"It's rather difficult with the mask" he replied.

Luke looked up at him, his eyes wide. "You mean... you can't take that thing off? Ever?"

"I can take it off for short periods of time," Vader told him, feeling uncomfortable talking about it. "But only in a controlled environment."

Luke nodded. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't know."

"Don't apologize," Vader said. "This was not your doing."

Luke said nothing in response, suddenly feeling very uneasy. There was so much he wanted to ask his father, but felt uncomfortable doing so.

"Where is Leia today?" Luke asked, deciding to change the subject.

"She has returned to Alderaan," Vader told him.

"You mean to say goodbye?" Luke asked.

Vader nodded.

"That's got to be hard," he commented.

"Leia has accepted it," Vader replied. "She knows that we belong together."

Luke nodded. "When will she be back?"

"Tomorrow," Vader replied.

It was not lost on either of them how strained it was between them. Even though they were father and son, they were strangers at this point, neither knowing much about the other. Clearly it would take some adjustment before they were comfortable with one another.

"Good morning," a physician said as he entered the room. He looked up at Vader, trying to decide whether he ought to extend a hand to the Dark Lord.

'I'm Doctor Eskol Rolands,' he said, deciding not to attempt the gesture of familiarity. "I'm Luke's attending physician."

"Tell me, Doctor," Vader said, not feeling the need to introduce himself, "when can my son leave the hospital?"

"Not for another forty-eight hours I'd say," Rolands replied. He turned to Luke. "The bacta treatments were very successful," he told him. "I've examined your last set of internal scans and there's no trace of damage."

"Good," Luke replied. "So can I get out of bed now?"

Rolands smiled. "That's an excellent idea," he said. "The fractures in your legs have healed nicely. It's time to regain your strength and mobility. I will send a droid in to assist you, Luke. You should start slowly, perhaps just walking up and down in this room and then move out to the corridor. How does that sound?"

Luke smiled. "Sounds great," he said. "I'm bored to death lying around."

Rolands nodded. "A good sign, for sure," he replied. "Perhaps your father can help you while I fetch the droid to assist you," he added, looking up at Vader.

Luke looked up at Vader as well, still having a hard time thinking of the intimidating figure as his father. "If he doesn't mind, I guess," Luke replied rather timidly.

Vader walked over to the bed. "I'm your father," he said to Luke. "Why would I mind?"

Rolands smiled, surprised by Vader's gentle approach to the boy. "I'll be right back," he said as Luke sat up and moved to the edge of the bed.

"Well?" Vader asked expectantly. "Are you ready to stand up?"

"I think so," Luke said, scooting to the edge. Tentatively he set his feet on the floor as Vader watched him closely. He offered Luke a hand, but Luke shook his head. "Let me try it first," he said.

"As you wish," Vader replied. The feelings of protectiveness astonished him as he watched his son step unsteadily onto the floor, and found that he had to fight the urge just to grab the boy and steady him. He suddenly had an image of Luke as a baby taking his first steps; a tiny, tow-haired boy with big blue eyes and a huge smile reaching his hands up to his father as he proudly toddled over to him. Vader pushed the thought from his mind, for it only served to anger him when he thought of all he'd missed out on. "Are you in pain?" he asked, trying not to let his uneasiness show.

Luke shook his head. "No," he told him as he stood for a moment. "I'm okay. I'm going to try and walk across the room."

Vader nodded, his fists clenching anxiously. He walked right beside Luke, ready to catch him when he fell, half expecting him to do so at any moment. But he didn't, he made it to the other side of the room without incident.

"That wasn't so bad," Luke said, looking up at his father with a smile.

"You mustn't over do it," Vader cautioned.

Luke nodded, secretly pleased by his father's concern. "I won't," he assured him as he started to walk back toward the bed.

Chapter 8

Eight

“Lord Vader, the rooms are ready for your inspection,” Captain Kassel informed his commander.

Vader looked up from the report he was working on. “Already?” he asked, standing up.

Kassel nodded. “Well, the workers were motivated,” he replied.

“I see,” Vader asked as they walked along together. “And how did you accomplish this?”

Kassel’s face turned red. “You did say cost was no object,” he reminded Vader. “And...”

“And money is the best motivator in the galaxy,” Vader finished. “Very resourceful of you, Captain.”

Kassel smiled. “Thank you, Lord Vader,” he replied, relieved that Vader wasn’t angry. The two men stopped as they reached the suite of rooms, and Kassel remained outside while Vader stepped inside to check it out.

The large suite consisted of two identical rooms, both spacious and furnished in the very same manner. The décor varied from one to the other, for Leia’s room had a definite feminine look to it, while Luke’s was decidedly masculine. Each room was equipped with a state of the art communications station, a large desk and plenty of closet and storage space. There was a fresher attached to each room, and there was a small common room between the two rooms.

Vader was pleased with the rooms, and turned to Kassel. “This is excellent work,” he told the captain.

Kassel nodded. “They did a good job,” he agreed. “Of course, the closets are empty. I figured the kids would want to buy their own clothes. You know how picky kids can be.”

Vader nodded, although he knew no such thing. “What about school?” he asked.

“I’ve contacted Veslack Academy,” Kassel replied. “The headmaster was off world, but I left a message with his secretary asking him to contact you directly when he returns.”

“Good,” Vader replied. ‘My son will be leaving the hospital tomorrow,’ he said, “and my daughter will be returning from her sojourn tomorrow as well. I want everything to be in order for when they move in.”

“It will be, sir,” Kassel replied. “The food replicators are being installed tomorrow and I’ve hired a cook as well.”

“Well done, Captain,” Vader replied. “When my children arrive, I want you to become their personal body guard. It will be impossible to keep their existence a secret, and no doubt the media will be more than anxious to get close to them. Your job will be to ensure that they are not harassed by them or anyone else. You may use any means necessary to keep them

safe, Captain. I am entrusting their lives to you. I believe you realize my expectations in this matter.”

“Perfectly, sir,” Kassel replied, reading between the lines easily. *Protect them or you’re dead*, was the inferred message, and it was not lost on Kassel. Having served Vader for close to three years, he knew the Dark Lord well enough to know that this was not an idle threat.

It was very late into the night before Vader finally retired. A great number of reports had piled up on his desk over the course of the past few days, and he was determined to get them finished. And yet, fatigue prevented him from doing so shortly after 2AM, and so he finally surrendered to it and left the work, vowing to return to it early the next morning.

It wasn’t often anymore that Vader dreamed, for the amount of time he actually spent asleep usually didn’t allow for dreams to develop. However the events of the past few days had left an imprint on his subconscious, and that night he dreamed of a time many years earlier, when he was a different man, and life seemed to be full of promise and hope...

The sun is high in the Naboo sky when we next awaken, as bright morning light streams through the slits between the shutters of the room. Padmé is in my arms, and we are still on the sofa where we finally fell asleep after two more torrid sessions of love making. I wake up to see her watching me. She smiles as she sees waking up.

“Good morning,” she says.

“I think it’s probably closer to afternoon,” I tell her with a smile.

She laughs. “I think you’re right,” she says. Her face grows pensive for a moment, and I sense some anxiety within her.

“What is it?” I ask, touching her face.

She looks at me, as though trying to put the right words together. “Ani, there’s something I need to tell you,” she says. “I hope you’re not going to be angry.”

“I won’t be,” I tell her. “Just tell me.”

She takes a deep breath before responding. “I... in the hurry to leave for Naboo, I forgot my birth control tablets,” she tells me. “I never forget them! I suppose I was just so excited about you being home, and coming here, and... I just forgot them.”

I nod my understanding. “Do you think we need to worry?” I ask her. “I mean, is it that time when you could conceive?”

“I don’t think so,” she replies. “The trouble with those pills is, it makes things like that nearly impossible to predict. But I don’t think we need to worry. I’m sorry; I hope you’re not upset.”

I smile at her, taking her face in my hands. “Upset? Of course not,” I tell her. “If something happens, well, we’ll cross that bridge when we get there. Let’s not worry about that, Padmé, or anything else. We have this time together now, let’s just try to put all our worries and fears out of our minds, okay?”

She nods, the relief evident in her eyes. “Okay,” she agrees. “I love you, Ani,” she says.

"And I love you," I reply, kissing her tenderly. "Now let's figure out how we're going to get out of here without the servants figuring out what we've been doing in here all night."

Padmé laughs. "That ought to be interesting."

Vader awoke with a start. *No, not that*, he thought, pressing the heels of his hand to his tired eyes. Finding the twins had allowed thoughts of his wife to reenter his mind. He had imprisoned those thoughts many years earlier, deciding that they were simply too agonizing to bear. But now that he'd found their children, the children who were conceived during that idyllic ten days on Naboo, it was impossible to keep them at bay any longer.

Deciding that he would not risk any further chance of dreams, Vader donned his mask and helmet once more, and left his hyperbaric chamber. Work would put the images of her from his mind; work would dull the keen sense of pain and loss that just the thought of her still managed to arouse within him.

The house was quiet as he made his way to his study, and Vader liked it that way. Sitting down at his desk, he picked up the next report, focusing his mind on it and it alone, banishing all thoughts of his long dead wife back to the prison of his subconscious mind.

Luke was in a light sleep when hunger a nurse entered his room. He was aware of her presence in the room but didn't open his eyes.

"Luke? Can you hear me?"

"I don't want to go to school today, Aunt Beru," Luke grumbled, pulling the blanket over his head.

Aunt Beru sat on the side of his bed. "Why not? Are you sick?"

"Uh huh."

Beru smiled. "You were fine last night. What's wrong?"

Luke was silent a long time. "The kids at school make fun of me," he told her from under the blanket. "They tease me because I don't have real parents."

Beru frowned. "Who did that? Tell me who did that, Luke."

Luke was silent for a long time, and eventually Beru pulled the blanket from his hands.

"Tell me," she said again.

Luke looked up at her, his big blue eyes brimming with tears. Beru said nothing, but pulled her young nephew up into a tight embrace. "Don't worry, Luke," she said soothingly, stroking his tousled hair. "You're a special boy, and those kids know it and they're jealous. That's why they tease you, Luke."

"Really?" Luke asked, looking up at her.

Beru nodded. "Yes," she assured him. "Really."

"Luke? Are you awake?"

Luke opened his eyes and looked up to see a nurse peering down at him.

“Yeah,” he grumbled.

“I’m sorry if I woke you up,” the nurse said. “But the doctor wants you to be up and on your feet as much as possible today. So let’s get you up,” she said.

Luke sighed, pushing the memory of his aunt from his mind, swallowing the lump in his throat that thoughts of her had created. He pushed the blankets back and swung his feet over the edge of the bed. The nurse smiled at him. “Good boy,” she said, holding a hand out to him. “Let’s go.”

Luke was walking down the corridor with the nurse at his side when Vader arrived. He looked up at his father and smiled, feeling quite pleased with himself for the progress he’d made.

“Hi,” Luke said. “What do you think? Pretty good, eh?”

Vader nodded, as he stood and watched Luke walk more steadily than the previous day. “Your recovery is coming along well,” he said. “But you mustn’t over do it,” he cautioned once more.

Luke nodded. “I know, I know,” he said, “I’m not. The doctor said I can do this, though, so I guess it’s okay.”

“I suppose so,” Vader replied, his eyes not leaving Luke for a moment. ‘Perhaps you’d like to take over here, Lord Vader,’ the nurse said. “I’m needed elsewhere.”

“Of course,” Vader replied, stepping over to Luke. He looked down at his boy, sensing that he was starting to tire. “Are you sure you’re up to more?” he asked.

“Yes,” Luke replied. “I’m sure.”

Vader nodded, seeing that his son was every bit as stubborn as he was.

“The arrangements for your living quarters are almost finished,” Vader told his son as they walked slowly down the corridor.

“Oh, good,” Luke replied. ‘You didn’t have to go to any trouble, though,’ he added. “I’m not used to anything fancy.”

“Nonsense,” Vader replied. “You are my son. You’ll want for nothing for the rest of your life, Luke, I promise you.”

Luke didn’t know how to respond to this, for he’d gone without so much for his whole life. He’d learned to make do with so little, and had learned to appreciate what little he had. The thought of living a life of ease and luxury seemed strange to him. “I don’t know what to say,” he said at last. ‘This has been so weird, all of this. I keep thinking I’m going to wake up and find it’s all been a dream.’ He stopped, and when his father didn’t say anything he continued. “I dreamed about Aunt Beru this morning,” he told Vader quietly.

Vader looked down at him. “You will dream of her from time to time, I’m sure,” he told him. “I dreamed of my mother after I lost her for a long time. I still do on occasion.”

Luke looked up at his father. “You… your mother died?” he asked.

Vader nodded but said nothing.

“Sorry,” Luke replied. ‘I guess that’s something we have in common, then,’ he said. “Neither of us has a mother.”

Vader said nothing, the pain of his own mother’s death still deep enough to render him silent. “Come,” he said. “You’re tired. Let’s get you back to your room.”

Luke didn’t argue, for he was tired, and his legs were aching. He allowed his father to steer him back to his room. They stopped in the doorway to allow Luke to rest for a moment, and he looked up at Vader as he did so. “Let me get to the bed on my own,” he said.

“Are you sure?” Vader asked doubtfully.

Luke nodded.

Reluctantly Vader released him, but walked along side Luke as he started across the room.

As he started on his way, Leia walked in the door. The sight that met her eyes excited her and she called out Luke’s name in excitement. Luke was startled by her voice and stumbled, but he didn’t go far, for Vader was there to catch him.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Leia said, running over to her brother. ‘I didn’t mean to startle you,’ she said, linking her arm through his and helping him to the bed. “I’m just so happy to see you.”

Luke sat down on the edge of the bed and looked up at his sister with a smile. “I’m happy to see you too,” he said.

Leia smiled, and looked up at Vader. “Hi,” she said.

“Leia,” Vader replied, very relieved to see her. “When did you return?”

“Just now,” she told him. ‘I had your man bring me here,’ she added, looking back at Luke. “You look wonderful!” she exclaimed.

Luke smiled. “Thanks,” he said. “The doc says I can get out of here tomorrow.”

“That’s great!” Leia declared. “Isn’t that great?” she asked, looking back up at Vader.

“It is good news,” he agreed, amused by his daughter’s enthusiasm. He could sense that under it she was fighting very hard to be strong about the separation from her adoptive parents. She was strong, amazingly strong, he reflected. *So much like her mother*, he thought wistfully. His musings were interrupted by the sound of his comlink, and he stepped into the corridor.

Luke noticed that Vader had stepped out of the room and took the opportunity to speak to Leia alone, something they’d not done since they were reunited.

“How did it go?” he asked her. “Saying goodbye to your parents must have been really hard.”

Leia nodded. She had done well so far not to let her sorrow get to her, but her brother was forcing her to examine emotions she’d just as soon leave alone. “It was,” she told him quietly. “I’m really excited to be with you, Luke, but they were the only parents I’ve ever known. I’ll miss them so much,” she finished, her voice no more than a whisper.

Luke felt his sister's sorrow as clearly as it was his own, and he remembered what their father had told them about how they were all connected through the Force. He had not understood at the time what that meant, but now he did. He felt Leia's emotions as keenly as if they were his, and as her eyes filled with tears, so did his.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "I didn't mean to make you sad."

Leia smiled. "You're very sweet, Luke," she said. "But you've been through far worse than me, losing your guardians the way you did."

Luke nodded. "Yeah, I still can't believe they're gone," he told her, brushing away an errant tear. "Leia, what do you think our life will be like living with our father?"

Leia shrugged. "I don't know," she said. "Different, that's for sure. But he really does want us to be together, Luke; I can feel his sincerity, can't you?"

"I guess," Luke replied. "You know what? I'm still kind of scared of him. I don't really know what to say to him, you know what I mean?"

"Yes I do," she agreed. "He's a very sad, very lonely man, Luke. He's been through a lot in his life, that's all I can tell you."

"Did he tell you that?" Luke asked.

"No, not in so many words," she replied. "I just know it from the things he's said. He loved our mother so much it broke his heart when she died."

Luke nodded, not knowing how to respond. To think that their father ever loved a woman that much seemed strange and unbelievable to him.

"It will be okay, Luke," Leia said at last, sensing her brother's reticence. "We'll have each other, remember?"

Vader stood in the doorway, overhearing his children's conversation. It was clear to him that neither of his children was terribly excited about the prospect of living with him. It angered Vader that this hurt him, and pushed it deep down inside of him, chastising himself for allowing himself to be vulnerable to them.

"I must leave," he announced, stepping into the room once more. "I have something to attend to that cannot be put off."

Luke and Leia looked up at him. "Okay," Luke said.

"I'll stay with Luke," Leia put in.

Vader nodded. "I will return later," he told them, and then left them without so much as a goodbye.

"Do you think he heard what I said about being afraid of him?" Luke asked his sister.

"I don't know," she replied. "I hope not."

Luke looked over at the doorway with a frown. It was not his intention to hurt his father's feelings, nor was it Leia's. And yet, he had left rather abruptly. Surely someone as infamous as Vader could not be offended by the comments of ten year old children. Could he?

“He told me that he’s got everything ready for us,” Luke told his sister. “I think he went to a lot of trouble and expense to do it, too.”

Leia nodded. “I’m sure of it,” she replied.

Luke hesitated before continuing, and looked over at the doorway to make sure their father wasn’t lingering nearby. “Leia, do you know anything about our mother?”

“Not much,” Leia replied. “I know her name was Padmé, and that she was a senator. She and our father were married in secret because he was a Jedi and they weren’t allowed to get married.”

Luke was astonished to hear this. To think that his father, who seemed so rigid and serious now, would have ever defied the rules so blatantly seemed impossible. “He must have loved her a lot to do that,” Luke commented.

“He did,” Leia agreed. “He still does, if you ask me. He can’t even speak of her without getting upset. I tried to suggest that maybe she was alive, that maybe her death was a big lie like ours was, but he wouldn’t even listen. He is still hurting over losing her, and it’s been ten years.”

Luke nodded. “Do you really think it’s possible that she’s alive?” he asked.

Leia sighed. “I don’t know,” she said. “If she is, she’s well hidden. Can you imagine what she must have gone through, Luke?”

“No, I can’t,” Luke replied quietly. ‘I wish I’d know her,’ he added. “I bet she was sweet, and kind, and beautiful.”

“Yes, I think so too,” Leia agreed with a smile.

Chapter 9

Nine

Darth Vader left the hospital and made his way to the Veslack Academy, which was situated on the other side of the city, not far from his own home. It was an impressive facility, with large expansive grounds and an excellent security system. Vader waited for the security field to lift and then entered the gated courtyard. Ignoring the curious looks of students on their way to class, he made his way up the long stairway. He was met at the top by a protocol droid.

“Good morning, Lord Vader,” the droid began. “Administrator Jeslow is waiting for you. Please allow me to lead you to his office.”

Vader said nothing in response, and simply followed the droid as it lead him into the building and down a long corridor to the main office. A secretary sitting at her computer did a double take as Vader entered the ante office, and then returned to her work, doing her best to master her curiosity.

“Ah, Lord Vader,” Jeslow said as Vader entered his office. “Please sit down.”

Vader took a seat in front of the desk and looked around briefly. The man’s credentials were in old style frames on the wall behind him, and they bespoke of a well educated man.

“I understand you have taken an interest in our facility,” Jeslow said, somewhat nervously. “I have to admit that I’m unsure why that is.”

“I am interested because of my children, Administrator,” Vader said at last.

“Your... your children, sir?” Jeslow said. “I was not aware that...”

“I have a son and a daughter,” Vader said, cutting him off. “Twins. They are ten years old, and will be coming to live here with me within the next few days. I want them to attend this school.”

To his credit, Jeslow managed to hide his shock at hearing this and smiled. “Well, I’m honored that you thought of us,” he said. “We would be delighted to have your children here with us at Veslack. There is, of course, some paperwork that will need to be filled in, just standard procedure, you understand.”

“Of course,” Vader replied. “I need not remind you that these are my children, Administrator. If they are not treated well, I will hear of it.”

Jeslow swallowed as he nodded. “Yes, yes of course, sir,” he replied. “I will ensure that they are well treated. You have my personal guarantee, Lord Vader.”

Vader stood up. “I will hold you to that,” he said, pointing a finger at the man. “Tell your assistant to put the paperwork together at once and forward it to my home,” he said.

And with that he left, leaving Jeslow more than a little shaken at the encounter.

Naboo

Sola Naberrie looked out the window of the speeder as her husband directed it through the dense foliage of the northern region. The mountain area was lush and green this time of year, and fresh mountain air heavy with the scent of wildflowers.

“Does she know you’re coming?” Darrod asked.

“Yes,” Sola replied. “You know she doesn’t like surprises.”

“That’s right,” Darrod replied. ‘Ten years already,’ he said with a shake of his head. “Hard to believe.”

Sola nodded. “In some ways it seems longer,” she said.

“I guess so,” he replied. “It doesn’t seem to get any better, either, does it?”

“No,” Sola replied quietly. “But how does a person get over something like that? I’m not sure I ever could.”

Darrod simply nodded in response as the building came into view. “Should I come in?” he asked.

“No, best not to,” Sola said. “You know how they get with visitors.”

“Give her my best,” he said as he made his approach to the landing platform.

“I will,” Sola replied, watching as the building grew closer.

Coruscant

“I can’t wait to get out of here,” Luke complained to his sister as they walked down the corridor together. “I’m so sick of all the doctors and medidroids.”

Leia nodded. “I’m sure,” she replied. “Do you think that we’ll be moving into our father’s home today?”

“I don’t know,” Luke said. “Doctor Rolands said he’d let me know this afternoon if I was ready,” he told her.

“Well you seem ready to me,” Leia told him. ‘I really hope you can leave today,’ she added. “I think I’d feel kind of weird living there alone with Lord Vader, I mean....Father.”

Luke smiled. “I know,” he replied. “I think it will take some getting used to for both of us,” he said.

Leia nodded. “Yes, it will,” she agreed. She looked up as she sensed something. “He’s here,” she said.

Luke looked at her, and then he felt it too. “Wow,” he said softly. “I didn’t really understand what he said about us being connected, but I do now,” he said. They both looked up as Vader appeared at the end of the corridor.

“You’re looking well, Luke,” Vader said as he reached his children.

“Isn’t he?” Leia said with a smile. “The doctor said he might be able to go home today.”

“Indeed,” Vader replied. “That is good news.”

Luke looked up at his father. “Would... that be okay?” he asked. “I mean, so you have a place for me?”

Vader looked at his son, surprised by his question. “Of course there is a place for you in my home,” he said. ‘You are my children,’ he added, looking at Leia. “Your home is my home.”

Luke and Leia looked at one another with a smile. Despite everything else, it was clear that their father wanted them in his life.

“The contractor finished work in the rooms this morning,” Vader continued. “So you can come home with me whenever you’re released.”

“That’s great,” Leia said, looking back at her brother. “We’re both eager to see our new home, aren’t we, Luke?” she asked.

Luke nodded. “Yeah, we are,” he replied.

Vader could sense that both of his children were nervous about the big change in their lives. It was bound to be a big change for all of them, himself included. Yet he was determined to make sure that he gave them the best life possible.

“Ah, Lord Vader,” Dr. Rolands said as he met them in the corridor. “As you can see your young boy is making excellent progress.”

Vader nodded. “So I see,” he replied.

Rolands hesitated for a moment before continuing, not quite sure how to phrase what he needed to ask.

“Am I correct in assuming that Luke will be living with you now that...”

“Yes,” Vader replied, cutting the doctor off before he could mention the death of Luke’s guardians.

Rolands nodded. “Good,” he replied.

“Are you saying that my brother is ready to leave the hospital?” Leia asked hopefully.

“I’d like to examine him again before I make that determination,” the physician replied. “Why don’t we do that right now, Luke?” he asked.

“Sounds good to me,” Luke replied.

The four of them proceeded to Luke’s room, whereupon Luke and the doctor went inside. Vader remained in the corridor with his daughter.

“Your things were moved into your room this morning,” Vader told her.

Leia nodded. “That’s good,” she replied.

Vader watched her, sensing her uneasiness. “Do you require anything else?” he asked, sharing her awkwardness.

“I don’t think so,” Leia replied. “Thank you anyway.”

Vader nodded, as another awkward silence ensued. "I have enrolled you and Luke at the Veslack Academy," he told her. "It is reputed to be the best school on the planet."

Leia smiled upon hearing this, for she loved school. "Really? That's wonderful!" she exclaimed. "I've heard a lot of good things about that school."

Vader was pleased at Leia's reaction. "You like school," he stated.

"Yes I do," she replied readily.

Vader nodded, wondering if Luke felt the same way. *If he's like me he doesn't*, he reflected.

"Did you?" Leia asked. "I mean, when you were a kid, did you like school?"

"No," Vader replied at once. 'I didn't. But your mother did,' he added. "She was an excellent student. Seems you are like her in more ways than one."

Leia smiled, pleased to hear it. "Will you tell me about her?" she asked, taking advantage of the moment. "I know so little, both Luke and I do. Will you tell us..."

"No," Vader replied abruptly. "Speaking of her is...difficult."

Leia was disappointed, but said nothing in response. She could sense her father's vehemence, but what was more, she could sense his pain. *You loved her very much, didn't you?* She thought sadly.

Vader looked at her, hearing her question clearly. He knew his children were bound to have questions about their mother. It was natural that they would. So why wasn't he able to answer those questions without reopening up all the wounds of the past? Without saying another word to his daughter, Vader walked into Luke's room to check on the doctor's progress.

Naboo

Padmé looked up at the sound of someone approaching. She had spent most of the day in the garden, the place she felt the most at peace. It had been a difficult couple of weeks for her; the anniversary of the birth of her children always was, for it reminded her of all that she had lost.

Sola smiled when she saw her sister, seeing at once that Padmé had been crying lately. A lot. This didn't surprise Sola, but at the same time, it concerned her. Ever since the death of her twins, Padmé had become more and more withdrawn. Isolating herself here among the holy women in their mountain abbey had been the only way Padmé could feel safe from the emperor, from Vader; but she was paying the cost of this security. Each time that Sola had come to visit her sister over the past ten years she had seen a little less of the sister she had once known, and more of the quiet, withdrawn woman Padmé had become. And yet, Sola reasoned, would she be any different if she were in Padmé's place? Would any woman?

"Hello," Sola said as she hugged Padmé. "It's good to see you."

"It's good to see you too," Padmé replied, returning her sister's embrace.

The two sisters sat down on the bench where Padmé had been seated when Sola had arrived.

"How are you?" Sola asked.

Padmé looked down at her hands folded in her lap. “Fine,” she replied.

Sola frowned. “How are you really?” she insisted.

Padmé looked up at her. In her eyes, Sola could see that she was very far from fine. “It’s been ten years, Sola,” she said quietly. “How do you think I am?”

Sola nodded. “I know,” she said. “I’m so sorry,” she added, not knowing what else to say.

Padmé shook her head. “I don’t know if I will ever get over that day,” she told her sister. “Just as I don’t know if I will ever forgive him for what he did.”

“He doesn’t deserve your forgiveness,” Sola replied at once. “He’s a monster, Padmé. Plain and simple.”

“I know,” Padmé replied. She looked off into the distance. “How could a person change so much, Sola? How could he go from being so loving, so caring to...to a murderer? A murderer of his own family??”

“I don’t know,” Sola replied. “I don’t begin to understand the Force and all that Jedi stuff. But when a man attacks his wife and unborn children...” she stopped, not feeling the need to continue. Both knew the rest; both knew how the twins had died within hours of their birth because of oxygen deprivation while in utero. Both of them knew the agony that Padmé went through when Obi-Wan had broken the news to her, and how she was even denied seeing them once more to say goodbye. *It’s for the best*, Obi-Wan had told her when she’d screamed at him for taking them away; *you’re not strong enough... it’s for the best...*

“I hate him, Sola,” Padmé whispered as tears filled her eyes. “I will hate him for the rest of my life. I don’t know what I would do if I ever met him face to face, I really don’t.”

“You never will,” Sola assured her. “You’re well hidden here, Padmé. He will never find you.”

Padmé nodded as the tears rolled down her face. She had always prided herself on being a strong woman; so how was it that she wasn’t strong enough to get through this?

“Come on,” Sola said, standing up. “Let’s take a walk. The gardens are so beautiful this time of year.”

Padmé nodded. “Yes they are,” she agreed, standing up. She brushed the tears from her face and joined her sister.

Chapter 10

Ten

Coruscant

Luke and Leia sat in the back of the speeder as the man who they'd learned was Captain Kassel directed the craft through the busy city streets. Luke had been released from the hospital earlier that day, and, after procuring the remainder of his clothes from the hotel where he'd been staying, Vader had signed the release papers to bring his son home. It was not lost on Vader that this was really his first official act as Luke's father, and it pleased him to do it. However, when he looked at the names on the form, one thing became very apparent to him. *My son's name is Skywalker.* What was worse, Leia's was Organa. *That will have to change,* Vader decided, *and soon.* Once he'd made his first public appearance with his children, he knew that there would be many who would be able to link Anakin Skywalker to him through Luke's name. And that was something he didn't want. Anakin Skywalker was dead, and his name meant nothing to Vader. It was only right that his children had the same name as him, he reasoned. Too many questions would be asked otherwise. And so Vader decided that his second official move as the father of Luke and Leia would be to legally change their surnames.

As for Luke and Leia, they both felt a mixture of excitement and trepidation as they sped towards their new home. They were eagerly looking forward to getting to know one another, for neither had known the joy of having a sibling until just recently. And yet, neither quite knew what to expect living with their father. He was nothing like either Bail Organa or Owen Lars, the only fathers that Luke and Leia had ever known. If both were honest, they both had to admit to being a little afraid of Vader even now; and yet they were still eager to get to know him, to see if there was more to the man who'd fathered them than the Sith Lord that was feared by the galaxy. Surely there had to be more, they reasoned; why would he want his children in his life if he were the heartless beast that the galaxy believed him to be?

Kassel slowed the vehicle as he left the busiest district of the city and started his approach to the building that Vader lived in. Luke and Leia looked out the window, trying to catch a glimpse of their new home.

"It's huge!" Luke gasped.

Leia smiled, realizing that to her brother it must seem that way. But she had been raised in a palace, so it was not nearly as impressive to her as it was to Luke.

"The school you will be attending is not far," Vader told his children. "Just further east of here."

"Great," Luke replied, trying to muster up some enthusiasm.

Leia looked at him. "You don't like school?" she asked.

"Not really," Luke admitted.

Vader smiled under his mask upon hearing Luke's reply. "School is important," he said. "I'm sure you will enjoy your classes there."

Luke said nothing in response, not wanting to seem ungrateful. He looked at Leia and shook his head, however, and she had to stifle a giggle.

"Your rooms have been outfitted with every amenity you will need," Vader told his children as he showed them into the suite. "Of course, you may wish to personalize them more as you see fit."

"This is amazing!" Luke said as he wandered around the enormous room he'd been told was his. It was easily as large as the entire home he'd lived in for the first ten years of his life. "Is there a food replicator in here?" he asked hopefully.

"No," Vader replied. 'Your nutritional needs will be met by a cook I have engaged,' he told him. "I have it on good authority that ten year olds are not responsible enough to eat properly if left to their own devices."

Luke was disappointed, but didn't show it. The last thing he wanted to do was appear ungrateful. It was obvious that his father had gone to a lot of trouble and expense to furnish these rooms. "Thanks for doing this," he said to Vader. "I mean it, this is really great."

"Yes, this is wonderful," Leia said, smiling up at Vader. "I'm sure Luke and I will be very comfortable here. We appreciate all the trouble you went to for us."

Vader turned to his children, the purity of their gratitude grabbing at his heart in a most alarming manner. Luke reminded him so much of himself at that age: the same innocent goodness, the same purity of heart. And Leia...the fact that she was the image of Padmé was hard enough to deal with, but as he grew to know his daughter more, he was beginning to see that she was like her in many ways: the same grace, the same kindness, the same maturity and wisdom. How was it Vader had not realized when he'd claimed his children that they would be a constant reminder of the past? How could he not have seen that every time he looked at them he would be reminded of her? Of their life together?

"It was no trouble," Vader said at last. "I am your father. I want you to think of this as your home now, both of you. You are free to go anywhere you wish in this house with the exception of my private quarters."

Luke and Leia nodded their understanding, and then wandered into Leia's half of the suite.

"Cool! Droids!!" Vader heard Luke exclaim. He walked into the room to see what they were referring to and stopped in his tracks when he saw the droids that Luke was referring to: C3PO and R2D2.

"These are your droids?" Vader asked his daughter.

Leia looked up at him. "Yes, they were...I was told that they were my mother's," she said hesitantly. "Is that right?"

Vader nodded, the sight of the droids heralding a flood of unwanted memories. He only hoped that their memories had been wiped, for the last thing he needed was Threepio asking a lot of questions.

"May I activate them?" Leia asked her father, sensing that the sight of them was unsettling to him.

"Yes," Vader replied. "If you wish. I have some work to do, so I will leave you to get settled in," he said, turning to leave.

Luke watched him for a moment, and then went after him. Vader sensed him behind him, and turned to face him.

"I... I was just wondering if there's any way I can get my stuff back," Luke said. "I don't have a lot, but..."

"You mean from your home on Tatooine," Vader said.

Luke nodded. "Yeah," he said. "I don't want to be a pain, but..."

Vader held up a hand to stop his son. It bothered him tremendously that Luke felt the need to apologize for asking for the simplest things, and made him realize just how poor he must have been living with his step uncle and aunt.

"I will send someone there to retrieve your belongings," Vader told him. "I should have thought of it sooner, Luke."

Luke smiled. "Thanks," he said. "Father," he added after a moment's delay.

Vader nodded, and then turned and left. Luke watched him leave and then returned to his sister and the droids.

Returning to his office, Vader did his best to focus on the work that was piling up on his desk. He knew that the emperor would be expecting a report within a few days, and Palpatine was not one to accept excuses. This Vader had learned the hard way. There were reports that needed to be completed, meetings that needed to be convened... the list went on and on. He reasoned that the twins had one another to occupy them, so life would go on much the same as it had before they had entered his life.

"Captain come here," Vader said into his comlink.

Kassel appeared in the doorway within moments. "Yes sir?"

"I want you to send some men to Tatooine," Vader said. 'My son has left most of his belongings there,' he explained. "I want them to retrieve them."

"Yes sir," Kassel replied. "Where is the boy's home?"

"I'll write down the coordinates," Vader replied, picking up a datapad.

Tatooine

Obi-Wan Kenobi sat in the cantina nursing a drink. He came here once in a while in order to prevent the solitude of his life from driving him mad. Some social interaction, even amid the dregs of society, was better than none at all. He'd made a few acquaintances over the ten years he'd lived in the wastelands of the desert planet, having appointed himself guardian of his best friend's son on the day Luke was born. Any attempts Obi-Wan had made to contact Luke had been aggressively rebuffed by Luke's Uncle Owen, who had chased the Jedi from the property on more than one occasion. Luke seemed happy, though; and he was well

protected in the isolation of Tatooine. So Obi-Wan simply watched from a distance, biding his time until such time when Luke's innate Force abilities became impossible for Owen to ignore.

"Yeah, I heard it on the news just this morning," the barkeep was telling a rather surly looking patron. "Owen Lars and his wife, both killed."

Obi-Wan looked up from his drink at this. "Did you say they were killed?" he asked.

The barman looked at Obi-Wan and nodded. "That's right," he said. "They were on Coruscant of all places," he added. "Killed in a traffic accident."

Obi-Wan felt a cold sense of panic filling him. "What about the boy?" he asked. "What about their nephew, Luke?"

"Apparently he survived the crash," the barman replied. "I don't know what's become of him, though. Poor kid, guess he's an orphan now."

Obi-Wan frowned as he nodded his understanding. *No, he's not an orphan... far from it, he thought grimly. I should have followed them there, he admonished himself; I never should have let Luke leave the planet without being there to watch him!*

Obi-Wan looked around the cantina, suddenly frantic. *I have to get to Coruscant, he thought; somehow I have to get to Luke before it's too late... I just hope it isn't already too late...*

Coruscant

Luke woke up the next morning feeling rather discombobulated. He'd grown accustomed to being woken up early by his aunt, and then more recently, by medical droids. But this morning he woke up on his own, or rather, by the rumblings of his stomach.

Sitting up in bed, Luke looked around his enormous bedroom once again. He still could not get over how huge it was, how well appointed and comfortable. The bed alone was more than twice as big as the small cot he was used to sleeping in back on Tatooine. And yet, as grand as the room was, Luke didn't feel like it was his. His own room had been small, and yet it was distinctively his, decorated with models of various ships suspended from the ceiling and scattered over any surface that he could spare. Luke loved to build, and he had taken great delight in salvaging bits and pieces of material from all over to add to his stock pile. Aunt Beru hadn't liked it, for she called his treasure trove junk; but she indulged him. Somehow she knew how important it was to Luke, and so she had come to ignore the pile and clean around it when she ever ventured into Luke's room.

"Luke? You awake?"

Luke looked over to the door that separated his room from his sister's, and then looked down to make sure he was decently attired. "Yeah, come on in," he said.

Leia opened the door and entered the room. She was already showered and dressed, wearing a neat pair of trousers, boots and a coordinating tunic. *How does she always manage to look so perfect?* Luke thought.

"Hi," she said with a smile. "Did you sleep well?"

“Yeah,” Luke replied. “You?”

Leia nodded. “Yes, very well. I guess I was more tired than I realized.”

“Yeah, me too,” Luke agreed. ‘I’m starving now,’ he added. “I wish there was a food replicator in here.”

Leia laughed. “You’re funny,” she told him.

“I’m serious,” Luke said as he got out of bed. He could feel his sister’s eyes upon him, and was suddenly self conscious. “I...uh, guess I fell asleep in my clothes,” he said, looking down at his rumpled shirt and trousers.

“I guess so,” Leia replied. ‘You know, this school we’re going to has a pretty strict dress code,’ she said tentatively. “I think maybe we ought to ask about getting you some new clothes.”

Luke frowned. “What’s wrong with my clothes?” he asked defensively.

“Nothing,” Leia replied at once. “They’re fine... but maybe not quite....appropriate for the Veslack Academy.”

Luke scowled, feeling embarrassed and angry at once. “Well I wasn’t raised as a princess,” he retorted, “so I don’t have fancy clothes.”

Leia smiled. “Of course you weren’t,” she countered. “You’re a boy.”

“You know what I mean!” Luke retorted, growing frustrated.

“You don’t have to get angry with me,” Leia replied, “I’m only trying to help.”

“I saw the way you looked at me a minute ago,” Luke countered.

“How was that?”

“Like I was some sort of homeless person.”

“I did not!”

“Yes you did!”

‘Don’t be so silly,’ she chided. “You’re being defensive.”

“Oh and now I’m silly?” he replied, digging himself deeper.

Leia rolled her eyes at this point and folded her arms over her chest. She was patient, but only to a point. “Luke, listen to yourself,” she said. “You’re making a big deal out of nothing. All I said was...”

“I know what you said,” he interjected. “You said I’m not good enough to go to that fancy school.”

Leia frowned. “I did not!!”

“Yes you did!”

“Well if this school doesn’t like the way I dress then I don’t want to go there,” Luke grumbled.

"You won't have a choice," Leia reminded him. "So stop being a baby about it."

"If I'm a baby then so are you," Luke countered. "We're twins, remember?"

"Don't remind me!"

"What is going on in here?"

Luke and Leia both turned to see their father standing in the doorway.

"I could hear the two of you arguing from the corridor," he continued. "What is going on?"

The twins looked at one another. "Nothing," they said simultaneously.

Vader rolled his eyes. *Here we go*, he thought. "Obviously it wasn't nothing," he said. "Or else you wouldn't have raised voices. So which one of you is going to explain to me what you're arguing about?"

For a moment neither of the twins said a word, and then, as if on cue, they both started at once, each pointing at the other, each speaking a mile a minute, trying to defend their own interests. Vader was too shocked to say anything for a moment, and simply stood there as they rattled on. And then finally he put up a hand.

"Stop," he said. 'This is getting us no where.' Vader had been commander of the Imperial Navy for ten years, and had never had problems enforcing discipline. But now, faced with ten year olds, he was stymied. And yet, even in his inexperience, he realized that he needed to set the ground rules quickly if there was to be peace in the house. "Leia, you begin."

"Why her?" Luke asked.

"Because I chose her," Vader countered.

Luke backed down; the tone in his father's voice telling him in no uncertain terms that he meant business.

Leia proceeded to relate what had happened, the way she saw it, during which time Luke tried several times to interject. He was stopped cold by a simple look from his father, and waited rather impatiently for his turn. When it came, he refuted much of what Leia said, and proceeded to tell his side of the story. Leia listened with arms folded, reminding her father of his wife in her posture and the expression on her face.

"I think I understand now," Vader said as the twins finally started to calm down. 'Luke needs new clothes, and Leia was pointing that out,' he said. "But Luke didn't like being told that, and felt defensive, even though Leia wasn't criticizing him," he continued. "After that things just got foolish," he added. "Does that about sum things up?"

Luke and Leia looked at one another and then down at the carpet. "Yes," they both muttered.

"I didn't hear that," Vader said. "Look at me when you speak to me, both of you."

The twins looked up at once. "Yes," they said again, their voices louder.

"So how do you propose we solve this problem?" he asked, folding his arms over his chest.

Luke and Leia looked at one another, each one of them feeling foolish now for what had happened.

"I guess we can apologize," Luke suggested. "I guess I did act kinda stupid," he added sheepishly.

Leia smiled. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings," she said. "Really. I just wanted to help."

"I know," Luke replied. "I guess I could use some new clothes," he added.

Vader nodded, pleased that the first crisis had been defused. "Yes, you could," he said. 'We'll see to that after breakfast,' he added. "Why don't you get cleaned up and join your sister in the dining room? I'm sure breakfast is ready by now. I'm assuming you're both hungry."

Luke nodded. "Yes, we are," he replied.

"Then get to it," Vader said.

Luke didn't need to be told twice, and scooted into the fresher to get cleaned up.

"This way," Vader said to his daughter.

Leia smiled; impressed with the way her father had handled the situation.

"You know, Leia," Vader said. 'Your brother has not grown up with the same privileges as you have,' he told her. "You must keep that in mind. He is bound to be defensive in some respects."

"I know," she replied. "I'll try to be more sensitive of that from now on."

Of course you will, Vader reflected; you're so much like your mother it's frightening.

"Are you joining us?" Leia asked as she took a seat in the dining room.

"No," Vader replied. "I have a work to do."

Leia frowned. "Don't you eat?" she asked.

Vader stopped and turned to face his daughter. "Not in the manner that you do," he told her simply. He said no more and left the room, leaving Leia to ponder the mystery who was her father.

"Good morning Miss," Captain Kassel said as he entered the room.

Leia looked up at him. "Good morning Captain," she replied.

"Did you sleep well?" Kassel asked as he took a seat.

Leia nodded. "I did," she replied.

"Good," Kassel replied. "Wow, this looks great," he said, helping himself.

Leia watched him, a slight frown on her face. "You're supposed to wait for everyone to get to the table before eating," she told him.

Kassel stopped, egg-filled spoon in mid-air. "Oh... sorry," he said, setting the spoon down again. He'd forgotten that Lord Vader's daughter was, in fact, a princess. Kassel folded his

hands on the table before him, hoping his stomach wouldn't growl too loudly while they waited. Luckily it wasn't long before Luke appeared and joined them.

"This is awesome!" Luke declared and set to work right away. Kassel took his clue from Luke and did the same. Leia simply sighed, realizing that she was not in the royal palace anymore.

Chapter 11

Eleven

Luke watched as his sister picked out what seemed to be an entire wardrobe of clothing. He had never selected his own clothes, and simply wore whatever his aunt bought for him. So he was quite accustomed to letting someone else do his shopping. But the things that Leia was picking out were nothing like what he was used to, and he was very close to pointing that out to her. But then he remembered the incident earlier that morning, and decided to say nothing. Leia only wanted to help him, and if that meant picking out clothes for him, then he'd let her do it.

"What do you think of this one?" Leia asked, holding up a tunic.

"Fine," Luke replied, not even looking at it. Leia frowned, and then had an idea. She handed the tunic to Threepio, who was already complaining about having too much to hold. Ignoring him, Leia proceeded to the other side of the shop where she sought out the frilliest, most feminine looking dress she could find. With a smirk on her face she brought it back and held it up for Luke. "What about this?" she asked.

"Yeah sure," Luke said, stifling a yawn. "Whatever."

Leia burst out laughing at this point. "Really Luke? I didn't realize you liked lacey things," she said.

Luke looked over at her and couldn't help but laugh too when he saw what she was holding up. "Uh, maybe not," he said. "That's more your style," he added.

Leia looked at the dress. "Uh, no," she said. "Way too frilly for me."

Luke smiled, glad to hear that his sister wasn't a total girly girl.

"You two about ready?" Captain Kassel asked.

"I think so," Leia replied. "At least Luke is," she added.

Kassel looked at Luke with a smile. "Don't like shopping?" he asked.

"Do you?" Luke countered.

"Not a bit," Kassel replied. "Come on, let's get these things bought. Your father will be wondering where you are."

Vader entered his office to find a young woman sitting waiting for him. When he'd engaged the services of a lawyer, he had expected someone older and far less feminine. Still, she obviously knew what she was doing since she'd agreed to see him.

"Good afternoon, Lord Vader," she said, standing up. "I'm Lara Varsin, family law," she continued, holding out a hand to him.

Vader was surprised by the gesture and merely looked at her until she lowered her hand again. "Sit down, Miss Varsin," he said. "I have a legal matter that needs to be taken care of as quickly as possible."

"Of course," she said, reaching into her valise to take out a datapad. "Tell me what you need."

"I want to change the surname of each of my children," Vader told her. "Legally change them."

Lara looked up, unable to hide the surprise and confusion in her expression. The fact that Vader had children was startling enough; but why did he want to change their names?

"That won't be a problem, sir," she said, taking notes, "so long as the children's mother agrees to it."

"Their mother is dead," Vader said simply.

"Oh," Lara replied, feeling awkward. "I'm sorry," she added. She couldn't help but wonder about the mother of Darth Vader's children; who was she? And how had she died?

Vader watched her, the woman's unprotected mind making her questions obvious to him. "My wife is no concern of yours, Miss Varsin," he said. "I would advise you not to think of her again."

Lara looked up quickly from her datapad, half expecting to be struck down by Vader. "I won't sir," she replied. "Forgive me. Now, what are the current names of your children?" she asked.

"Luke Skywalker and Leia Organa," Vader told her. "They were kidnapped at birth and raised separately," he added, not wishing to go into the personal details of the history. "I have recently found them, and wish to make them mine in every sense of the word, including my name."

Lara nodded in understanding. "Of course you do," she said. Ordinarily under such circumstances, she would ask for documentation proving that he was the twins' father; but given the fact that this was Darth Vader, the right hand of the emperor, she decided it would be prudent to forego that formality. "Is there anything else I can do for you?" she asked instead.

"No," he replied. "But should I think of something, I will contact you," he said, standing up, letting her know the meeting was over.

"Very good," she said, standing up as well. "Thank you, Lord Vader," she said, closing her valise. "I'll be in touch."

As he walked her out the door, Luke and Leia came racing down the corridor and nearly ran into her. Lara smiled and looked back at Vader. "Your children?" she asked.

Vader nodded, annoyed by the twins' behavior.

"They're charming," she said. "Goodbye, Lord Vader," she added. "I'll show myself out."

Vader waited until she had disappeared from view before he turned to the twins. "Is there a reason you are running in the house?" he asked, his displeasure clear in his voice.

"No, well, not really I guess," Luke replied, looking at Leia.

"I guess we're just happy to be home," Leia added, ever the diplomat.

Her words calmed Vader, just as Padmé's always had, and he simply shook his head in amusement. "Try not to be so...enthusiastic next time," he remarked.

Leia smiled. "Okay, Father," she said, trying out the name for the first time. 'We bought Luke lots of new clothes,' she told him as they started walking towards their room. "Do you want to see them?"

Vader didn't want to squelch his daughter's enthusiasm, but he had absolutely no interest in seeing them. "Perhaps later," he said.

"See Leia?" Luke said. "I told you. Guys think clothes are boring, right Father?"

Vader had no desire to be drawn into the middle of another tête-à-tête between the twins; and yet his son was so eager to relate to him on some level, that he felt compelled to answer him. "Yes, you're right," he said. "But it's polite to pretend not to be, for the sake of ladies," he added, looking at Leia.

Luke wasn't sure if he ought to laugh or not, so he merely shrugged.

"Oh my goodness," Threepio lamented as he came toddling into the room, laden with parcels. "I'm quite worn out from all this excitement."

Artoo whistled something derogatory, to which Threepio merely told him to switch off, his standard come back.

"Come on Threepio," Leia said. "These things aren't going to put themselves away, you know."

"Yes, Mistress Leia," Threepio sighed. "I'm coming."

Alderaan

Breha Organa awoke with a start, yet another nightmare having haunted her sleep. It seemed that since losing Leia she had nightmares almost every night now. The ache in her heart that had begun the day Leia had left was not going away. Breha doubted that it ever would.

Rolling over in the enormous bed, Breha realized that she was alone. She sat up and listened for Bail, but he was not in the room. She got out of bed and noticed that the door to the balcony was ajar. Realizing that was where he was, Breha walked outside.

"Can't sleep?"

Bail turned to his wife, her voice startling him. "No," he told her. "You?"

Breha shook her head. "I had another nightmare," she said.

Bail nodded, not surprised to hear it. She had woken him up on more than one occasion with troubled cries in her sleep. "I had one too," he told her, leaning his forearms on the

railing and looking out into the darkness. "I dreamed that he found Padmé."

Breha said nothing in response for a moment. "I think she ought to be told," she said finally. "She has a right to know."

Bail shook his head, his own heart in turmoil. "How can she be told?" he asked his wife. "She thinks they're dead, Breha. We told her that they'd died, remember? How can we tell her the truth now?"

Breha frowned. "I have always hated the way she was lied to," she said quietly. "Imagine how the poor woman has suffered!"

"We wouldn't have had Leia if she'd been told the truth," Bail pointed out.

Breha knew he was right, and part of her felt like a hypocrite because of it.

"I know she's suffered," Bail continued, looking at his wife. "But the Jedi insisted that this was the only way to ensure the safety of Luke and Leia."

"Well it didn't exactly work, did it?" Breha pointed out. "Vader has them both, and Padmé is all alone, believing her precious babies died ten years ago. What's the sense of continuing this charade now?"

"Padmé is safe where she is," Bail replied.

Breha considered this for a moment. "If I were her, I'd want to know," she said. "Even if knowing meant coming out of hiding. I'd want to know, Bail, and so would she. You know her better than I do. Can you honestly say that I'm wrong?"

Bail shook his head. "No," he admitted. "You're absolutely right. It's just that...." He stopped as a frown creased his brow.

"It's just that you don't want to be the one to tell her," Breha finished for him.

Bail nodded. The thought of having to tell Padmé that she'd been lied to, that she'd suffered unnecessarily for ten years, that she'd been robbed of the first decade of her children's lives had created a cold pit of dread in Bail's stomach. And yet, who else would tell her? The Jedi? They were conveniently hidden away, far from Vader and his emperor. No, it would fall upon Bail to tell her. And he would be the one to bear the brunt of her anger and resentment. *But perhaps that is only fitting, he reflected. Perhaps it's what I must do as punishment for allowing her to be lied to in the first place, for going along with this heartless plot at all...*

"You're right," Bail said at last. "She must be told. Only... I don't know what the fallout will be once she does know. Knowing Padmé, she will stop at nothing to get her children back."

Breha smiled. "All the more reason to tell her, don't you think?"

Coruscant

It has been nearly three months since I have seen my wife, three months without hearing the sound of her voice, without touching her... but all that is about to change. Three days'

furlough has been given to me, a much welcome break from this wretched war, and I am racing home to see my Angel.

Giving Obi-Wan a plausible excuse, I leave him at the temple and head for home. It is dark outside, and yet the traffic is still heavy, taxing my patience even more. I dodge in and out of traffic, narrowly avoiding more than one collision, ignoring the dirty looks and curses hurled in my direction. My need for Padmé is too great, and I am determined not to let anything or anyone stand in my way.

The apartment is dark when I finally arrive home. I simply stand in the hallway for a moment, soaking in the peaceful, warm ambiance of my home. I can sense my wife everywhere here, and know that she is sleeping right now. I smile as an idea comes to me, the thought of it sending a surge of desire through me that is almost painful in its intensity.

Stealing down the corridor, I walk into the bedroom. In the darkness I can make out Padmé's sleeping form on the bed, and for a moment I simply watch her as she sleeps. Her beauty takes my breath away. I know I will never cease to be amazed by the power she has over me. Even now, in her sleep, her very presence stirs my senses.

Silently I undress, leaving my clothes and boots in a pile on the floor that she will no doubt chastise me for in the morning. I smile as I think of how I will tease her for being so fussy, and move over to the bed.

Using the Force, I remove the blanket from her body and look at her. The thin fabric of her nightgown has ridden up and is bunched around her hips. I climb onto the end of the bed and move up to her bare feet. Bending to her, I plant a soft kiss on her ankle as my hands move along the insides of her calves. Padmé begins to stir as my kisses become more insistent, my hands more aggressive; and when my tongue finds the back of one knee, she moans softly. I smile, looking up at her and realize that she is dreaming. I wonder how many dreams like this she's had during our separation.

"Ani?" she murmurs in her sleep, starting to awaken. "Ani are you here?"

I move up and lie beside her, pulling her body to mine. "I'm here," he tell her, burying my face in her hair, pressing kisses to her neck. 'I've missed you, Padmé,' I whisper, "So much," I add, bringing my mouth to hers and kissing her deeply. Padmé returns my kiss with equal ardor, her arms wrapped around my neck...

Vader awoke at this point, simply slamming the door on the memory that his unconscious mind had invoked. He thought that he'd learned not to need her, to master the weakness; but the dreams he had of her told him differently. Even after ten years he still needed her, still wanted her; but she is gone now, she died just as you foresaw, just as you feared. Rage filled Vader, quickly replacing the lust that had filled him as a result of his dream. You lied to me, my master, he thought, clenching his fists in anger; you told me I could save her... you told me that was the only way... and I believed you... I believed you!!

Lowering his helmet, Vader decided not to allow his mind to torment him any longer. He left his hyperbaric chamber and left his quarters, deciding to use the time to work on the pile of work that was steadily growing higher on his desk.

Chapter 12

Twelve

Leia awoke early the next morning. She was excited; for today was the first day she and Luke were starting at their new school. Leia had already picked out the outfit she would wear, and had set the clothes out the night before to save time. She jumped out of bed and headed to the fresher to get started with her day.

Luke awoke not quite so early, but the first thing he noticed was that he ached. He sat up in bed, and then lay down again and onto his side with a groan. The doctor at the hospital had warned him not to over do it, but, in true Skywalker fashion, he had done just that. And now he was paying for it. The newly healed fractures in his legs and ribs ached, his head ached, and he felt exhausted. So when his sister came bounding into the room ready to take on the world, he covered his head with his pillow.

"Luke, why are you still in bed?" Leia said, coming over and pulling the pillow from him. "You know we're starting school today. Come on, get up!"

"I feel awful," Luke grumbled, pulling the covers over his head. "I don't want to go."

Leia put her hands on her hips and frowned. "Luke, I know you don't like school, but you can't just not go."

Luke pulled the blanket off and looked up at her. "No, really Leia," he told her. "I feel really bad. I'm all achy and tired."

Leia was about to accuse him of being a faker when she remembered the accident and its recentness. What was more, she could sense that he really was feeling badly. "You mean because of the accident?" she asked.

"Yeah, I think so," Luke replied. "I don't know what else it would be. I guess I over did it yesterday."

"Well challenging me to a race up the stairs was probably not a good idea," Leia agreed.

"No," Luke replied. "I hope Father won't be angry with me," he said quietly.

"I don't think he will be," Leia replied. "He can tell if you're faking," she added with a hint of a smile.

Luke scowled. "I'm not faking!"

"I know, I know," she said. "I'm just teasing. I'll go and tell him. Do you want Threepio to bring you something to eat?"

"No, I just want to go back to sleep," Luke replied, rolling over onto his side again.

Leia looked at him, knowing her brother well enough by now to realize that loss of appetite with him meant he wasn't well. "You *are* feeling bad," she said. "I'll go tell Father."

Luke nodded, and closed his eyes. Within a few minutes, he was asleep again.

Vader had just picked up another report to peruse when he sensed the presence of one of his children. He looked up to see Leia standing in the doorway.

"Hi," Leia said, smiling somewhat nervously. "Is it okay if I come in?" she asked.

Vader nodded.

"Luke isn't feeling well," Leia said. "I think he's still feeling the affects of the accident."

"Are you certain that he just doesn't want to go to school?" Vader asked.

Leia nodded. "I could tell he wasn't faking," she told him. "I don't know how I know, I just do."

Vader nodded his understanding and stood up. "I will check on him," he said. 'Have your breakfast, Leia,' he added. "I will take you to school in thirty minutes."

"He's sleeping," she told her father as he left the room.

Vader turned and looked at her. "I won't wake him," he assured her, and then continued on his way.

As he entered his son's room, Vader could feel Luke's discomfort immediately. He walked over to Luke's bed and stood for a moment and simply watched his boy as he slept. *Should I wake him to give him something for his pain? Or let him sleep?* Indecision had never been something that Vader had been plagued with; and yet as he stood watching his ten year old boy sleep in obvious discomfort. Vader's life experience was vast, but parenting was a new experience for him. *His mother would know what to do*, he reflected; *she always knew what to do, no matter what the circumstances...*

Pushing thoughts of his wife from his mind, Vader decided to let Luke sleep, making a mental note to contact the boy's doctor as soon as possible to ask his advice.

Leia sat beside her father in the speeder as they made their way to the Veslack Academy. She had butterflies in her stomach as they neared the impressive building, and wished that Luke was with her. Leia was not overly shy, but the thought of starting at a new school where she knew no one was rather intimidating, even to someone as confident as her.

Vader could sense his daughter's trepidation, and wished he knew the words to say to alleviate her fears, but he didn't. *Her mother would know what to say*, he reflected, thoughts of Padmé coming to mind again. *She would have the right words*. And then he remembered something.

"You ought to know that I registered you and Luke using my name," he told her. "Not your adopted name."

Leia turned to him, surprised to hear this. "You mean... they'll know me as Leia Vader?" she asked.

Vader nodded. "Yes, I'm in the process of changing your name legally," he told her. "Both you and Luke."

Leia digested this silently. "Where did Luke's name come from?" she asked. "His guardians weren't named Skywalker."

Vader was silent for a moment, not wishing to get into a discussion of this delicacy as they were making their approach to the landing platform outside of her school. "It was once my name," he told her simply. "A long time ago."

Leia wanted to ask him more, but they were landing now, and she had to focus on what was coming. She did, however, make a mental note to ask him later. "Here we go," she said, her nervousness filling her up again.

As she and her father walked into the main office, Leia could feel the eyes of everyone up on her, and sense their astonishment and fear. Clearly the sight of Darth Vader with a child was a highly unusual one.

"Good morning, Lord Vader," Administrator Jeslow said as he met Vader and Leia in the office. He looked down at Leia with a smile. "Welcome, Miss Vader. I'm Von Jeslow, administrator. We're honored to have you here at Veslack."

Leia gave him her best regal smile. "Thank you, Administrator," she replied. "I'm very excited to be here."

Jeslow smiled, and then noticed that Luke was absent. "But where is your brother?" he asked. He looked up at Vader. "Your son is not here?"

"No," Vader replied. "He was involved in a very serious speeder accident recently, and is still feeling the effects of it."

"I'm very sorry to hear it," Jeslow replied. 'I hope he'll be feeling well enough to join us soon. Meanwhile, let's get you introduced to your teacher,' he continued, looking back at Leia. "She's looking forward to meeting you."

Leia nodded, feeling her nervousness returning; for despite her outward confidence, she was still a ten year old girl. Raised as a princess she had learned how to maintain a regal appearance, how to hide her true feelings; but those feelings existed nonetheless. And right now she was frightened, nervous and anxious all at once. Glancing up at her father, she had to fight the urge to ask him to take her home, not to leave her here in this strange place. But she did fight it. She was the daughter of Darth Vader, after all. Much was expected of her here, no doubt as much as was expected of her when she was Princess Leia Organa, perhaps more. She was determined not to let her father down. Reaching up tentatively, she slipped her small hand into his large gloved one. Vader was surprised by the gesture, and looked down at her. He could sense how she felt, and gave her hand a slight squeeze. Leia smiled at him, not needing him to express himself verbally to get his message.

"Here we are," Jeslow said as they stopped outside of a classroom. "Classes haven't started yet, so we can get you introduced to your teacher before the other students arrive."

Leia and Vader followed the administrator into a large, pleasantly inviting room. It was lined with banks of computer terminals, and had tables arranged in groups of four. There were large windows on one side of the room, through which morning sunshine filled the room.

"Hello," a young woman said as she walked over to meet them. 'I'm Lucia Zadane,' she said. "You must be Leia," she added, giving her a smile.

Leia nodded, liking her teacher immediately.

"I know starting in a new school can be scary, but you have nothing to worry about, Leia, I promise you," Lucia continued. "We have about fifteen children in this class, and they are all wonderful, friendly people. I know that you'll be made to feel very welcome here, and will feel at home in no time at all."

Leia smiled, feeling more at ease hearing this. "I'm very excited to be here, Miss Zadane," she replied.

Vader watched the exchange, sensing his daughter starting to relax. The young teacher was genuine, he'd determined that already. Aside from some trepidation where he was concerned, he sensed nothing but good will within the young woman.

"It's an honor to meet you, Lord Vader," Lucia said, finally turning to Vader. "I can assure you that your children will be very welcome here."

Vader merely nodded in response, wondering when she'd notice that Luke wasn't there. As though she could read his mind, Lucia frowned. "But where is Luke?" she said, looking back at Leia. "Where is your brother?"

"He's not feeling well," Leia told her. "He was in an accident about a week ago and isn't one hundred percent yet. But he's very excited about coming to school, too."

"You will furnish Leia with whatever assignments Luke misses due to his absence," Vader said.

Lucia looked back at him. "Of course," she said. At this point there was a chiming sound, and Leia realized that this was the signal for the day to commence.

"Here come your classmates," Lucia told Leia.

Leia nodded, and then looked up at her father as the teacher walked to the door to greet her students. "I guess I'll see you later," she said, a pang of anxiety hitting her in the stomach.

Vader nodded, and then touched Leia's face lightly. "You will," he said. "Enjoy your first day," he added.

Leia smiled. "Thanks," she said. "Bye."

The students who were filing into the classroom had been prepared for the arrival of the daughter of Darth Vader, but seeing the Dark Lord up close was something entirely different. With a mixture of awe and fear the youngsters regarded Vader as he left the classroom. Leia watched him go too, and then put on her best princess face to meet her new classmates.

Chapter 13

Thirteen

Vader returned to his home, hoping to get some work done while Leia was at school. And then he remembered that Luke was still home. He stopped outside of his son's room, wondering if he ought to check on him, but not wishing to wake him. He decided not to chance it, and proceeded to his office.

Vader had been seated at his desk for a matter of mere moments when See Threepio entered his office.

"Excuse me, Master Vader," the droid began tentatively. "I thought you'd want to know that young Master Luke is awake."

Vader nodded. "Have the cook arrange a healthy breakfast for him," he told the droid. "And tell him I'll be busy with work for the next several hours."

"Yes sir," the droid replied, and left the office at once.

Satisfied that he now had the peace and quiet he needed to get his reports done, Vader settled in for a long day of paperwork.

Veslack Academy

"So what's it like having Darth Vader as your father?"

Leia shrugged. "I've only known he's my father for a week," she told the group of friends she was eating lunch with. "So far it's been fine. Different, but good."

"Is he strict?" another child asked.

Leia thought for a moment. "I think so," she said, remembering how he'd reprimanded her and Luke for arguing, and for running in the house. "But he's fair."

"I think I'd be scared if he was my father," one boy admitted.

"Me too," piped up another.

"I can honestly say I'm not afraid of him," Leia told them, "and haven't been since I met him. But before that, before I met him, I was too. But now that I know him a little, I'm not afraid at all, not one little bit. He looks scary with the mask, but he's not really, not to me."

"Does he ever take it off? The mask?"

"Yes," Leia replied. "But only in private. We've never seen him. I think he wants it that way."

"Well I think it's cool that Lord Vader is your dad," one older girl said. "You think he'd ever let you have friends over?"

Leia smiled. "I'm sure he would, yes," she replied. Just then the bell rang, announcing the end of lunch hour. The children stood up, leaving their plates for the service droids to clean up.

"Leia, do you want to come to my house after school?" one young girl by the name of Pati asked her. She and Leia had become fast friends over the course of the day.

"I don't know," Leia replied. 'I'd have to check with my father. He's picking me up after school I think,' she added. "I'll ask him."

Pati smiled. "Great," she said. "Come on, it's time for history. And Mr. Partlow gets mad when we're even one second late."

"You mean Mr. *Fartlow*," one boy piped up, to which the other boys laughed heartily.

Pati simply rolled her eyes and looked at Leia with a shake of her head. "Boys," she said. "They're so immature."

Leia nodded in complete agreement.

Home of Darth Vader

It was nearly noon when Luke finally worked up the nerve to enter his father's office. He was bored, and was at loose ends in the big apartment with only the droids to keep him company.

Vader sensed his son's presence even before Luke entered the room and looked up. "Feeling better?" he asked.

Luke nodded. "Yeah, I was beat," he said.

"Understandably," Vader replied, looking back down at the report again.

Luke watched him for a moment, and then walked closer to the desk. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"Work."

"What work?"

"Reports."

"About what?"

Vader looked up at his son, trying his best to remain patient. "Nothing that would interest you," he said.

Luke could sense his father was growing impatient, and asked no more questions. But he didn't leave either. He simply stood and watched as Vader continued his work. After a few moments of silence, Vader looked up again. "Is there something you require?" he asked.

"No," Luke said. "I'm good."

Vader nodded, and then returned to his work. However, his son's presence was a distraction to him, and he found himself unable to concentrate. Looking up at Luke once more, he decided that the boy needed something to do.

“Are you settled into your new room?” he asked.

“Yeah, it’s great,” Luke replied with a smile. “Still, I can’t wait for my stuff to get here so I can decorate it the way I like.”

“And how is that?” Vader asked, curious.

“Back on Tatooine I had models of ships hanging from the ceiling of my room,” Luke told him. ‘I love to build models,’ he added. “I’m pretty good at it.”

I’m sure you’re better than pretty good, Vader mused. “Have you seen the workshop on the lower level?” he asked.

Luke’s eyes widened. “You have a workshop?” he asked.

Vader nodded as he stood up. “I like to build things too,” he told his son. “Come with me,” he added, deciding that the reports would have to wait yet again.

“Did you like building things when you were a kid, too?” Luke asked as he and Vader rode the lift to a lower level of the complex.

“Yes,” Vader replied. “Very much.”

“What kind of stuff did you build?” Luke asked, excited to have made another connection with his father.

“Well, I built a pod racer,” Vader told his son.

Luke’s eyes widened in amazement. “A pod racer? You built a *pod racer*??”

Vader nodded as they stepped out of the lift. “I raced it too,” he added. “I was the only human ever to do so.”

Luke was rendered speechless by this revelation. He’d always wanted to go to the pod races, but his uncle had forbidden it. This, of course, had only made Luke want to go more. And now, to hear that his own father had *raced* in them...

“That is so cool!” Luke replied. ‘I’ve always loved racing. Me and my friends used to race their swoop bikes in Beggar’s canyon.’ He stopped as he came to a realization. “You lived on Tatooine,” he said, looking up at his father, “didn’t you?”

Vader nodded. “Until I was nine,” he replied as they reached the workshop.

Luke was about to ask another question when the sight of the workshop stopped him cold. “Whoa,” he said softly. The walls were virtually covered in tools over every type, some Luke had never even imagined before. There were two long work tables down the center of the room. “This is awesome!”

Vader was amused by his son’s enthusiasm. It pleased him that he and Luke shared a common interest.

“Come,” Vader said, placing a hand on a hand on his son’s shoulder. “Let me show you around.”

Veslack Academy

Leia stood amidst her new friends as they waited for their respective rides. She could hardly believe that the first day of school was over. She'd enjoyed herself so much that the day had flown by.

"When is your brother coming to school?" one friend asked Leia.

"I'm not sure," Leia replied, feeling a twinge of guilt for having almost completely forgotten about her twin brother. "Tomorrow hopefully."

"Does he look like you?" another asked. "I mean, you're twins, right?"

"Duh, Kari," another girl said. "They're fraternal twins, not identical."

Kari frowned. "How do *you* know?" she asked defensively.

Leia smiled and let the others explain it to the clueless young girl. Finally a speeder she recognized as being one of her father's pulled up to the security gate.

"Leia Vader, your ride is here," the security guard announced as he accepted the security code and opened the gate.

Leia turned to her friends to say goodbye.

"Will you ask now?" Pati asked as she walked with Leia to the speeder. "About coming to my house?"

"Yes, come on," Leia relid. But when the girls reached the speeder, Leia saw that it was Captain Kassel at the controls, not her father.

"Where's my father?" Leia asked the captain.

"I haven't seen him all afternoon, Miss Vader," Kassel replied. "I'm assuming he's at a meeting."

Leia was disappointed to hear this, and turned to her friend. "I guess I can't come over today," she told her.

Pati nodded. "Okay," she replied. "Ask him tonight, okay? Maybe you can come over tomorrow."

"I will," Leia promised as Kassel opened the door for her. "See you tomorrow!" Kassel climbed back into the speeder and sped away, leaving Veslack Academy far behind.

Vader's home— workshop

"You built See Threepio!! No way!"

"Yes I did," Vader replied as he watched his son work. "I was younger than you are when I started him, but left him on Tatooine when I left."

"Why did you leave?" Luke asked, looking up briefly.

Vader said nothing for a moment. Speaking of those days still conjured up too many painful memories: his mother, Qui-Gon Jinn, and, most painful of all, his Angel, Padmé.

"Watch what you're doing there," Vader said, noticing that Luke's grip on the welding iron was slipping. "You must be focused when you're handling dangerous equipment."

Luke nodded, and returned his attention to the work he was doing.

“Excuse me, Master Luke,” Threepio said as he entered the workshop. “Your things have arrived.”

Luke said nothing, for he was concentrating on his task. Threepio grew exasperated and looked at Vader.

“Understood,” he said. “You may leave.”

Threepio was somewhat taken aback by Vader’s terseness, and simply turned and left.

“It seems the men have returned from Tatooine with your things,” Vader told his son.

Luke looked up at his father. “Really? That’s great!” he said, setting the tool down and bolting for the door.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Vader said, stopping him in his tracks.

Luke turned around. “Uh... upstairs?” he replied.

Vader pointed to the table where Luke had left all his materials and tools. “This is not acceptable,” he said. “If you are to enjoy the privilege of using this room, you must accept the responsibility of cleaning up after yourself.”

Luke nodded a sheepish expression on his face. “Sorry,” he said, coming over and cleaning up. “I guess I was just excited about my stuff,” he added by way of explanation.

“Yes, I noticed,” Vader replied as he watched Luke tidy up his mess. Once he’d done so, Vader gave him a nod of approval and then they left the workshop together.

Chapter 14

Fourteen

Leia arrived home just in time to see Luke and Vader stepping out of the lift.

"You're home!" Leia said, looking at her father.

"Yes, so are you," Vader replied calmly. "How was your first day at school?"

"Captain Kassel told me you were at a meeting," Leia said, ignoring her father's question.

"Clearly he was mistaken," Vader said, not understanding the hostility he was sensing from his daughter. "Is there a reason why this is a problem?"

Luke knew his sister well enough to see that she was annoyed, and would just as soon not get involved. So while she was preparing to fill in their father, he made off to his room to unpack his belongings.

"Well, I was hoping to go to a friend's house after school," Leia began, "and was going to ask you if..."

"What friend?" Vader interjected.

"Her name is Pati," Leia continued. "And she..."

"What is her surname?" Vader asked.

"I don't know," Leia replied. "But she's really nice and..."

"She's your friend after one day? A friend whose surname you don't know?" Vader demanded.

Leia frowned. "So? She's nice, and I like her, and her and I really hit it off. All I wanted to do was go to her house after school," she said.

"Out of the question," Vader replied, folding his arms over his chest.

"Why?" Leia demanded, matching her father's posture.

"Because I don't know this girl," he said. 'Because you don't know her,' he continued, "because strangers cannot be trusted....should I go on?"

"You're being very unfair," Leia felt compelled to point out.

"Perhaps, but I have the right to do so," he countered. "I'm the adult here."

"So I'm not allowed to have friends?" she retorted, her anger simmering dangerously. "Is that what you're saying?"

"I'm saying nothing of the kind," Vader replied. 'Your tone is highly inappropriate, Leia,' he added. "Go to your room and cool down."

“Fine!” Leia said, turning and stomping off to her room.

Vader watched her go, clenching his fists in frustration. *Girls are definitely more difficult than boys*, he decided. Luke was already well under control; Leia was going to be the difficult one, he decided. *She has my temper*, he realized as he walked to his office; *that’s not a good thing*.

Meanwhile, Luke had already opened up the crate left by the storm troopers and was digging through his things. How shabby his clothes looked now in comparison to the fine new ones his father had bought for him! And yet, seeing them made Luke melancholy, for he knew that each piece of clothing had been bought with his uncle’s hard earned money, each patch sewn on by his aunt with tender care. Luke hadn’t counted on the emotional effect seeing all his things from home would cause, and as he pulled one thing after another out of the crate, the tears soon began to fill his eyes. *They’re gone*, he thought, the pain of his guardians’ deaths still very close to his heart. In the recent excitement of finding his long lost sister and father, he’d managed to put aside his grief; but now, faced with the remnants of the life he’d shared with Owen and Beru, he couldn’t help but face it. *I’ll never see them again... they died because of me, because I made them take me here... if I hadn’t wanted to go on that stupid trip they’d still be alive...*

The last thing that Luke pulled from the crate was the model ship that had been his birthday gift only recently. He smiled sadly when he picked it up, remembering how excited he’d been. It had cost his uncle a great deal of money, but Owen had loved Luke enough to make that sacrifice. Seeing it again now made his heart clench painfully, his throat constrict tightly. And when one of the wings fell off because the troopers had packed it so carelessly, Luke broke down.

Leia was working on her homework when she sensed her brother’s distress, and at once she stood up and ran to his room. When she saw him sitting in a pile of shabby clothes, holding a broken toy, she felt as though her heart would break.

“Luke, it’s okay,” she soothed, coming over to him at once. She sat beside him on the floor and put an arm around him. “We can get a new one. I’ve seen them in shops all over...”

“No, I don’t want a new one,” Luke protested miserably. He looked at his sister, the tears streaming down his face. ‘Don’t you see? Uncle Owen gave this to me,’ he said softly, caressing the ship’s contours lovingly. “It was the last present he ever gave me,” he added, his voice cracking. “And now it’s ruined, and I can never get another from him, because he’s gone! And Aunt Beru is gone! And I’ll never see them again! And it’s all my fault they’re dead, it’s all my fault!”

Leia wasn’t certain why he felt this way, but the strength of his misery was enough to bring tears to her own eyes. She wrapped her arms around her twin, cradling him as she would a baby as Luke mourned for his dead guardians, the emotional catharsis that he’d avoided for more than a week now finally catching up with him.

Leia was not the only one who had felt Luke’s pain. As he sat at his desk trying valiantly to catch up with his paperwork, Vader felt it too. He looked up, unable to concentrate, something he’d decided was impossible to do when his two children were at home. He was so in tune with them through the Force that he had even come to know when they fell asleep at night. And right now, he knew that his son was in a very bad way. Standing up without delay,

he left his office and headed down the corridor to the suite where his twins were, hearing Luke's crying before he even entered the room.

"What is wrong?" he asked as he stood looking at the twins.

Leia, who'd been trying to comfort her twin, looked up at him. "His toy is broken," she said, pointing to the model that now sat on the floor, its wing dangling precariously from one corner.

Vader frowned under his mask. Surely his son was not so soft that he'd cry over such a thing! He was ten years old, for Force sakes!

"It can be replaced," Vader said simply. "Stop crying."

Leia was about to explain when Luke looked up. "I'm not crying because of a broken toy!" he declared defensively. "Why doesn't anybody get that?"

"Then why..." Vader began, finding himself at a loss once more to understand the ten year old thought process.

"He misses his aunt and uncle," Leia said quietly. "That was their last present to him, and it's broken."

Vader nodded, understanding at last. "I'm sorry it was broken, Luke," he said at last, summoning the model to his hand with the Force as both twins looked on with astonishment. He examined it briefly. "It can be fixed," he decided.

"How did you do that?" Luke asked.

"You mean this?" Vader asked, flying the ship back to his son. Luke nodded as he took the ship. 'The Force,' Vader replied. "I will teach you both about it one day," he added. "But for now I think we need to get this mess cleaned up," he said, looking at Luke's pile of clothing.

Luke nodded and stood up, wiping his nose along his sleeve as he did so. He felt better now having had a good cry.

"Did your models make the trip?" Vader asked his son in an attempt to deflect his attention from the broken ship.

"Yeah, they're okay," he said, indicating them on the bed.

Vader walked over and examined them, impressed by his son's craftsmanship. "These are excellent," he said, picking one up and taking a closer look.

Luke brightened visibly under his father's praise. "Really? You think so?"

Vader nodded. "Yes, really," he said.

Leia watched the exchange, pleased that their father had managed to lift Luke's spirits, but also somewhat envious. She felt like an outsider at that moment, and decided to leave as the two of them looked at the other models and Luke told Vader where he planned to hang them in his room.

Later that evening

"I think you're really going to like it there," Leia was telling Luke over dinner. "Everyone is so friendly, and our teacher, Lucia, is just wonderful."

"You call her by her first name?" Luke asked in astonishment. "The teacher?"

Leia nodded. "Yes, all the kids do," she replied. "Of course there are a couple of teacher who don't let you. The history teacher, Mr. Partlow is kind of stuffy."

"Mr. Partlow?" Luke asked, smiling as he imagined the nicknames the unfortunate teacher must have. "Did you say Partlow?"

Leia sighed. "Yes," she said. "And I'm sure you all know what the boys call him."

Luke nodded, his smile growing. "Yeah, I think so," he said, knowing his sister wouldn't be impressed to hear him say it, particularly during dinner. "Did you make some friends? Are the kids nice? Or are they all stuck up?"

"Some are," she admitted, 'but mostly the older ones. The ones in our class are nice,' she continued. "They are looking forward to meeting you."

She told Luke this in order to make him feel better about coming; but in reality, it only made him more nervous. He was certain he'd feel out of place among all the socially well off children of important families; in his mind he was still just a simple farm boy from Tatooine.

"I don't know why," he mumbled, pushing his vegetables around on his plate, trying to make their number appear smaller. "I'm nobody important."

Leia frowned. "You most certainly are," she told him. 'You're the son of Darth Vader,' she reminded him. "Remember?"

Luke looked up at her. "Yeah, I remember," he said. 'Do they know that?' he asked her. "I mean, we don't have the same last name as Father."

"We do now," Leia told him. "He told me he'd registered us with his name, and that he's legally changing our names to Vader."

Luke frowned. "Oh," he said quietly.

"Don't you think we ought to have our father's name?" Leia asked.

"I already do have our father's name," Luke told her. "Skywalker is our father's name."

Leia looked around to the doorway to make sure their father wasn't close by. "You know he doesn't like to hear that name," she said quietly. "I don't know why, but he doesn't."

"No, neither do I," Luke replied. 'He told me today that he'd lived on Tatooine when he was a kid,' he confided in her. "And that he'd raced in the pod races there."

"Pod races?" Leia asked. "What are they?"

Luke explained to his sister about the races, and her eyes grew wider as she imagined their father participating in such a dangerous sport.

"He raced in those races when he was a *kid*?" Leia said incredulously.

Luke nodded. "Cool, huh?"

"I guess his parents weren't as strict as he is," Leia replied.

"I know his mother died," Luke told her. "I don't know about his dad. Think he'd tell us if we asked him?"

Leia shrugged. "I just wish he'd tell us about Mother," she said. "I'd give anything to know what she looked like," she added.

"Good luck," Luke replied. "She's the last person in the universe we'll ever learn about, at least from him."

Leia nodded, knowing her twin was absolutely right.

Later that evening

With the twins finally in bed, Vader had managed to put a dent in his paperwork. He noted in his agenda that he had a meeting to go to early the next morning, and made a mental note to tell Captain Kassel to take the twins to school.

Deciding he needed to try and get at least some sleep, Vader stood up and left the office. He stopped outside of the twins' rooms and reached out to them, to double check if they were sleeping. Sensing that Luke was, he walked first into his room. The sight of his son sleeping with his arms wrapped around the broken toy grabbed at Vader's heart, and for a moment he could only stand there and watch him. Something was happening to him, something he never imagined would happen in a thousand years: his heart was learning to love again. After the death of his wife, Vader's heart was as battered as the rest of his body. He'd vowed never to let that happen again, and had built an impenetrable wall around himself. But now, the strength of that wall was being compromised. Having his children in his life was compromising it. He could not deny how they made him feel. Looking at his son now as he slept he was awash with it: pure, absolute love. *I love them*; he thought incredulously, the power of the long rejected emotion shaking him in its intensity.

Using the Force, Vader carefully lifted Luke's arm and floated the ship over to his waiting hand. He looked at the damage, making a mental note to soundly reprimand the troopers whose negligence had caused the damage. And then he had an idea. Taking the ship with him, Vader walked over to the door that joined the two rooms to see why his daughter was still awake.

Leia did not hear her father enter the room, for she was too engrossed in the holo that she was watching. She smiled tearfully as she watched the festivities of her last birthday party, the sight of her adoptive parents making her throat constrict with sadness.

Vader sensed that sadness, and, although it troubled him, he wasn't terribly surprised by it either. Until now Leia had shown remarkable resiliency given the tremendous changes she'd been forced to undergo lately. And yet, she too was just a child. And she missed her adoptive parents as much as Luke missed his guardians.

Leia suddenly sensed her father's presence and turned to him with a gasp, expecting him to be angry with her. After all, Vader had been quite clear in his dislike of Bail Organa and resented him deeply for having taken Leia as a baby.

"I was...just watching my birthday," she explained, reaching over to turn Artoo's projector off. She wiped the tears from her face, not wanting him to see her crying.

Vader watched her, unsure how to respond. And then he had an idea.

"There is something else you might be interested in watching," he told her. He turned to Artoo. "Artoo, do you still have the program Naboo One in your memory banks?"

Artoo whistled an affirmative.

"Play it," Vader ordered.

Leia, too surprised by her father's reaction, simply watched as the hologram materialized. She saw a beautiful woman with long curly hair wearing a lacy white gown and veil. The image moved back to include a young man in a brown robe. He had blue eyes and blondish hair, with one long, thin braid on one side that draped over his shoulder. Leia wasn't certain what it was she was watching, but when she sensed the strength of her father's emotions, she turned to him, knowing at once who this was. "That's my mother, isn't it?" she asked softly.

Vader nodded, his eyes not leaving the image of his angel. "Our wedding," he told her.

"She was so beautiful," Leia said, looking at the image again, feeling her eyes fill with tears. "She looks like an angel."

"She *was* an angel," Vader replied.

"That's you?" she asked.

Vader nodded. "I was nineteen," he added.

Leia looked back at the image and smiled. "You're so handsome," she said.

Vader said nothing in response, and started to leave, unable to stand it any longer. He felt his daughter take his hand and he looked back at her.

"Thank you," she said, looking up at him. "I know this wasn't easy for you, and I want you to know how much I appreciate you doing it."

Vader said nothing in response, and simply left the room, taking the broken toy with him.

Chapter 15

Fifteen

Naboo

Sola Naberrie stood in the queue waiting for service at the license bureau. Ever since the Empire had taken over control of public facilities ten years earlier, there was more red tape in every public sector. Sola glanced at her wrist chrono, noting with dismay that her lunch hour was almost up, and she still hadn't renewed her license. Folding her arms over her chest in irritation, her eyes drifted up to the holoscreen that was perched above the service desk, no doubt there to distract people as they waited.

"And listen to this," the reporter on a tabloid program was saying as Sola tuned in, "rumor has it that Lord Darth Vader's twins have recently enrolled at Veslack Academy, the capital's most prestigious learning institution. Yes, you heard me; Lord Vader has ten year old twins, a son and daughter. At least, that's the talk around the capital. Believe what you will folks. And on to other news..."

Sola lost her place in the queue as she stood and listened, unable to believe what she was hearing. *No, it can't be true*, she thought, *it has to be idle gossip. But... twins? Why twins? Why a son and a daughter? A ten year old son and daughter??*

Running out of the licensing bureau, Sola hurried to her vehicle. She knew that Darred, her husband, had business contacts on the capital. Perhaps they would be able to find out for sure if the rumors were true. And if they were... Sola couldn't imagine what the fall out of that would be.

Coruscant

So much for getting some sleep tonight, Vader mused as he left the workshop. He stepped onto the lift and examined the model one final time. The wing looked as though it had never been broken, thanks to the hours of effort he'd put in to repair it. *Luke will be pleased*, he thought as he left the lift and headed back to his son's room. It was well past midnight now, and Vader realized that he would get very little sleep. He hated meetings, and to go to one on no or very little sleep was only asking for trouble. And yet, somehow, fixing his son's toy seemed more important just now.

Opening the door to Luke's room quietly, Vader simply flew the ship to the nightstand bedside Luke's bed where the boy would be sure to see it upon awakening. It gave Vader an uncharacteristic feeling of warmth in his heart to know how happy his son would be. And then he remembered; tomorrow was Luke's first day of school. *And I won't be here to take him*, he realized. This only made him resent the meeting more and vowed to make everyone there pay for the inconvenience it was causing him.

Naboo

A soft kiss upon my ankle stirs me in my sleep, as do the strong hands that move along the insides of my calves. Am I dreaming? I've dreamed of Anakin making love to me so many times since he's been away that I think it must be so, and simply relax and enjoy... but as the kisses become more insistent, the hands more aggressive, I start to wonder. And when I feel an avid tongue run along the back of one knee, a soft moan escapes my lips. No dream has ever been this real. I can't be dreaming. Part of me wants to awaken to find out for sure, but part is afraid to, and would rather stay here in this beautiful vision rather than face the cold reality of his absence.

"Ani?" I murmur, "Ani are you here?"

I have my answer at once, as he moves up and lies beside me pulling my body to his. I'm not dreaming! He really is here! Thank the Maker, he's here and he's safe!

"I'm here," he tells me, burying his face in my hair, pressing kisses to my neck. 'I've missed you, Padmé,' he whispers, "so much," he adds, bringing his mouth to mind and kissing me deeply. The feel of his hands upon me after so long is like electricity running through my veins, and I wrap my arms around him, kissing him back with equal desire, equal desperation. Our need for one another is all consuming as our hands and mouths communicate what words could never convey. He is a part of my very soul, and only when we are together am I complete. My need for him is like a hunger, only slaked fully in this oneness with him, body and soul...

Padmé awoke with a start to the sound of thunder outside. She sat up in her bed, trembling from the sensual images and the feelings they'd created within her. No, don't think of that, don't think of him... he's gone, and he'll never come back, never. Darth Vader killed him, just like he killed Luke and Leia. Put him out of your mind, she rebuked herself. Covering her face with trembling hands, she wept quietly, still mourning the loss of the only man she would ever love.

Coruscant

Luke woke up to the rather annoying voice of See Threepio. He opened one eye and looked down to the end of his bed where the droid stood.

"Oh, Good morning, Master Luke!" Threepio chirped cheerfully. "Time to get up! Lord Vader wanted me to ensure that you were ready for school in a timely fashion."

"Okay, okay," Luke grumbled, tumbling out of bed. "I'm up."

Butterflies filled his stomach as he thought about starting school. The fact that Leia had enjoyed her first day meant little to him. Leia would fit in anywhere. Luke wasn't sure the same thing could be said about himself. Stumbling towards the fresher, Luke pushed his anxiety down deep, not wanting his father to be disappointed in him.

At breakfast Leia gave Luke a run down of what to expect at school. Luke pretended to be listening as he ate his meal with far less gusto than usual.

"You two about ready?" Captain Kassel asked as he entered the dining room.

"Just about," Leia replied. "Where's Father?"

"He left for a meeting about an hour ago," Kassel reported, pouring himself a glass of juice.

Luke looked up quickly. "You mean he's not taking us to school?"

Kassel shook his head as he took a drink of his juice. "Sorry Luke," he said. "Looks like you're stuck with yours truly."

Luke was crestfallen to hear this, and felt his anxiety level go up another notch. "I was hoping he'd be taking us," he said quietly.

"Your father's a very busy man," Kassel told him. 'You'd best get used to that,' he added, looking at his wrist chrono. "Finish up here, kids. I'll meet you in the hangar in ten minutes." He then finished his juice, set the glass down and left the room.

"He took *you* on *your* first day," Luke grumbled. "It's not fair."

Leia dabbed her mouth with her napkin. "I'm sorry, Luke," she said. "But Captain Kassel is right. Father is very busy. I'm surprised we've seen as much of him as we have, actually."

Luke shrugged. He knew she was right. Their father was Darth Vader, the emperor's right hand. Perhaps it would be best to get used to him not being around very much.

"Come on, Luke," Leia said, sensing her brother's disappointment. "*I'll* be with you. You'll be just fine."

As they returned to their rooms, Luke remained quiet. He was determined that this was unfair, even preferential treatment. He entered his room to brush his teeth and stopped when he saw the toy his aunt and uncle had given him for his birthday. The broken wing had been fixed, and upon closer inspection, he noticed that it had been cleaned and polished. It looked brand new, like the day he'd first received it.

"He fixed that last night," Leia told him, coming into the room and seeing Luke holding the toy.

Luke looked up at his sister. "How do you know?"

"I was up late," she told him. "I couldn't sleep. I saw him take it from your room. That was after midnight."

Luke looked at the model. "This must have taken hours," he said.

Leia nodded. "I guess he knew how upset you were," she suggested. "And how much this ship means to you."

Luke suddenly felt guilty for having believed his father unfair. He had clearly spent a long time fixing the model, and had still been up very early that morning for a meeting. "I guess so," Luke said at last.

Leia put a hand on Luke's shoulder. "He loves us, Luke," she said. "I can feel it, can't you?"

Luke nodded. "Yes," he replied softly, setting the model back down. "I wasn't sure what to expect when we came here, but I know that he does."

Leia was about to tell Luke about the remarkable holovid their father had shown her the previous night when Threepio appeared in the doorway to hurry them along. Luke went with his sister, feeling more sure of himself than he had in a long time.

In a conference room, elsewhere on Coruscant

“And these are the figures of the fiscal year up to the first quarter...” the man droned on and on.

Vader had always hated meetings, particularly ones that dealt with financial matters. It wasn't long before he found himself disengaging from what was going on around him, his mind wandering. A favorite past time of his that he'd discovered long ago was to simply stare at each of the individuals present, unnerving them utterly. While doing this, he read their minds, which were an endless source of amusement as they thought frantically why the Dark Lord had deemed them deserving of his gaze. He knew all the dirty little secrets of most members of the bureaucracy from this little parlor game he'd invented for his own amusement: who was cheating on their spouse, who was in debt, who had developed a substance abuse problem, whose children were turning out to be hellions...

Once he'd tired of this, Vader's thoughts turned to his own children. *I hope Luke's first day is going well*, the thought. *The boy is so timid. Damn that Owen! He clearly berated him constantly. I will change that. Once they have begun training, Luke will develop the confidence he lacks.*

“Lord Vader?”

Vader turned his head to look at who was addressing him. *What was he talking about?* He wondered, reading the man's mind briefly.

“Yes, a break is acceptable,” Vader replied at last, relieved at the suggestion. He stood up and moved away from the table, anxious to put some distance between he and the bureaucrats he found so loathsome. He walked over to one of the large windows, folding his arms as he took a position there. His body language left no change for misinterpretation: *leave me alone*. And yet, there was one who was either too obtuse to read the signs or too foolhardy to heed them.

“Lord Vader, I'd like to congratulate you on the recent additions to your family.”

Vader turned and looked at the man. “What did you say?” he asked sharply.

The man swallowed uneasily. “Uh... y-y-y-your children, Lord Vader,” he stammered. “Your son and daughter are in the same class as my daughter at Veslack,” he explained.

Great, Vader thought; that *didn't take long*. “Indeed,” he said simply.

“I was not aware that you were a father,” the man foolishly continued.

“My life is not subject to public scrutiny, Governor,” Vader replied in a tone of warning. “Neither are my children.”

The man nodded, backing away at once. “Of course not,” he said nervously. “My apologies, Lord Vader,” he added for good measure.

Vader was sorely tempted to choke the man where he stood. But that wouldn't do much for Luke and Leia's chances of fitting in at school, and so he fought the urge. *I suppose it was only a matter of time before word of the twins' got out*, he reasoned. *Children are not terribly discreet*. Vader realized that it was only a matter of time before the media caught wind of Luke and Leia's presence in his life. The thought of reporters hounding his precious children

made Vader clench his fists in anger. Making another mental note, Vader decided to have Captain Kassel assign a personal guard to each of the twins to ensure that didn't happen.

Seeing that the meeting was about to resume, Vader returned to his place at the head of the table, hoping fervently that this drudgery would soon be over.

Naboo

Sola Naberrie was at the computer when her husband arrived home. She wasn't normally home before him, and he was surprised to see her.

"Hi," he said, kissing her on the cheek. "What are you doing home at this hour?"

"Looking for something," Sola said, not taking her eyes from the screen.

"What?" Darred asked.

Sola frowned. "I'm not even sure," she admitted.

Darred looked at the screen, and frowned when he saw that his wife was searching for information about Darth Vader. "Vader? Why the hell..."

"I heard something today," Sola interjected. "I can't believe it... I...I don't want to believe it," she said, continuing her search.

"What are you talking about?" Darred asked, utterly confused by now.

Sola looked up at him. "I heard that Darth Vader has a son and a daughter," she told him. 'Ten year old twins,' she continued, "and that he'd enrolled them in some fancy school on Coruscant."

Darred continued to frown. "Where did you hear such a thing?" he asked.

"It was on the holonet," she said. "It was on when I was in the licensing bureau this morning."

"Oh you can't believe that rubbish," Darred said. "Half of what you hear on there is gossip and hearsay."

"But Darred, why would someone start such a rumor?" she countered. "Vader? With children?? And ten year old twins? A boy and a girl?? Isn't that a little bit of a coincidence?"

"What are you suggesting, Sola?" Darred asked. "That Padmé's twins are alive? That they *didn't* die?"

"I don't know what I'm suggesting," Sola replied. "But if it's true..."

"It can't be," Darred interjected. "It just can't be. Who would lie to Padmé about such a thing?? It's unconscionable. No one would do such a thing. And if they'd been with Vader all this time, surely we'd have known about it by now, don't you think?"

Sola didn't reply, for she didn't know what to say. She looked back at the screen. "I don't know what to think," she told him. "But I do know one thing; if Luke and Leia are alive, I intend to find out."

Darred considered this for a moment. "I could contact Remy if you want," he suggested. "He might be able to find out something, he's right there on Coruscant."

Sola nodded. "Yes, please do," she said. She looked up at him. "I need to know, Darred. I need proof. And once I have proof, I'm going to tell Padmé. And if it is true... then may the Force help those lying monsters for taking them from her."

Chapter 16

Sixteen

Coruscant — Veslack Academy

Luke found that his first day of school was going by faster than he'd imagined possible. Things were so different here; everything was so new, the technology so cutting edge, and the teachers so encouraging and fun. Back on Tatooine the teachers were never this nice, he reflected as Miss Zadane dismissed the class for lunch. Luke had already made lots of friends, and had found that the other children found him fascinating simply by virtue of the fact that Darth Vader was his father.

"My dad built a *pod racer* when he was younger than me," Luke bragged to his friends. "And raced it too!"

"Get lost," one boy challenged. "No human has ever raced in a pod race!"

"Maybe he's not human," one boy suggested.

"Don't be stupid," another retorted. "Luke and Leia are human, so their dad has to be human too."

"Have you ever seen your dad without his mask, Luke?" one boy asked.

"No," Luke admitted. "But we've only been living with him for a few days," he hastened to add. "I'm sure I will some day."

Leia looked over at Luke from the table where she was sitting with her own friends. She was relieved that her brother had fit in so well, for she was concerned that his shyness would prevent him from doing so. And yet, it seemed that he was quite at ease amidst his new friends. What was more, she had noticed that several of the girls had been giving him admiring looks and even flirting with him. The protective side of Leia wanted to tell them to back off and leave him alone; but, she reasoned, it wasn't surprising. With his blond hair and big blue eyes, Luke was very cute, or so some of Leia's friends had told her. Leia was certain, however, that Luke was far too immature to even take note of the girls. Besides, he was only ten; and there weren't too many ten year old boys who would. Leia smiled, deciding that things were going to work out just fine at Veslack.

Elsewhere on Coruscant

It was with a great sense of relief that Vader finally left the conference room after a grueling day of meetings. He was exhausted and miserable, having spent the day with a group of stuffy, irritating politicians after having had next to no sleep the night before.

As he made his way to the hangar bay where his speeder was located, Vader made contact with Captain Kassel to let him know that he would pick the twins up on his way home. The thought of spending time with Luke and Leia helped melt away the anger that had been simmering within him all day.

Veslack Academy

"Is your father picking you up today?" Pati asked Leia as they made their way towards the security gate with the rest of their class.

"I don't know," Leia replied. She didn't want to mention to her friend how mistrustful her father was, even of a ten year old girl. 'I haven't had a chance to ask him about coming over yet,' she added, feeling badly about the lie. "He's pretty busy."

"Yeah, I'm sure," Pati replied. "Oh well, maybe after the weekend," she said.

Leia nodded, hoping that by then she would have managed to talk her father into allowing her to visit Pati's house.

Luke caught up with his sister as one by one their friends were picked up.

"Hey there little brother," Leia said, giving Luke a smile. "Had a good day?"

Luke smiled. "Yeah, it was great," he said. 'You were right,' he added. "The kids here are really cool. And the teachers are way nicer than the ones I had back on Tatooine."

"You lived on Tatooine?" Pati asked.

Luke nodded.

Pati looked at Leia. "I thought you said you were from Alderaan," she said.

"I am," Leia replied. 'Luke and I weren't raised together,' she explained. "It's kind of complicated," she added.

Pati was intrigued, but didn't pry. She figured Leia would tell her as much as she felt comfortable telling her, and in her own time.

"Look, there's your father now," Pati said, pointing towards the security gate.

Luke and Leia looked too, and were surprised to see their father walking over to them. Captain Kassel had merely waited in the speeder for Leia the previous day, but clearly their father was far more fastidious about ensuring their safety.

Luke hadn't seen his father since the previous night, not since he'd discovered the toy that Vader had spent so much time fixing, and his heart filled at the sight of him. Without thinking of what others would think, Luke ran to meet his father.

No one was more surprised than Vader by Luke's actions, and he stopped walking and simply allowed Luke to reach him. When he did, the boy spontaneously threw his arms around his father in a hug of pure and utter joy at seeing him. Vader, too stunned to react for a moment, simply stood and allowed the gesture of love. He literally could not recall the last time someone had shown him this level of affection, and he was overwhelmed by the emotions that he felt accompanying it. He looked down at his son, seeing in the eyes that matched his own, what he'd felt in his own heart as he'd watched Luke sleeping the previous night: pure, unadulterated love.

"You had a good day, I take it," Vader remarked, setting his hands on Luke's shoulders.

Luke nodded. "It was awesome!" he replied.

"I told you it would be," Leia said, coming up to them. She was a little embarrassed by her brother's public display of affection, but said nothing to him.

Vader looked at Leia, putting a hand on her shoulder. "No doubt you made it an easy transition for him," he said.

Leia smiled, thrilled by her father's praise. "I tried to," she told him.

Vader nodded. "Come," he said, as Luke finally released him. "Let's go home. I've had a miserable day."

As Vader walked between his two children back to the speeder, none of them suspected that their every move, including Luke embracing his father, had been captured on holovid. A tip given to a local news station had lead the crew here and they had been waiting all day for a glimpse of Vader's twins. But to see the three of them together was more than any of them had hoped.

"Did you get all that?" the reporter asked.

"Yep, every bit of it," the holovid camera operator replied.

"Too bad we couldn't hear what they were saying," the reporter remarked.

"Who cares? Vader hugged his kid, that's big news, words or no words," the cameraman replied as they watched the speeder fly away.

The reporter nodded in agreement. "You're right," he said. 'Every news station on Coruscant will want this footage,' he said with a smile. "We're going to be very rich men, my friend. Very rich indeed."

"So why did you have a miserable day?" Leia asked her father as they flew home.

"I was in meetings all day," he replied. "I hate meetings."

Leia laughed. "They can be kind of boring, I guess," she replied. She glanced to Luke in the back seat. "Guess Luke's worn out from his first day," she commented.

Vader glanced in the rearview mirror to see his son fast asleep. "So it seems," he replied. "Things went well with him?" he asked.

Leia nodded. "He did great," she replied. 'Everyone made him feel so welcome,' she added. "I think at least two girls have crushes on him already," she concluded with a smile.

"Indeed," Vader replied. "And how does Luke feel about being the object of their admiration?"

Leia laughed again. "He's clueless," she replied. "You know boys at that age," she added.

Vader was amused by his daughter's comment; she spoke as though she was years older than her twin. "I do," he replied. He hesitated for a moment before continuing. "I met your mother when I was nine," he told her.

Leia was surprised hearing him speak of her mother voluntarily and looked at him. "You did?"

Vader nodded. "She was fourteen," he added. 'I was in love with her from the moment we met,' he added wistfully. "So don't be so sure that Luke is as oblivious as he seems."

Leia smiled. She wanted to ask him so much, but knew that she needed to tread lightly where the topic of her mother was concerned. "Thanks again for showing me the holovid of your wedding," she said tentatively. "Would it be okay if I showed it to Luke?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied as he approached their home. "If you think he'd be interested."

"I know he would be," she replied.

Upon arriving home, Captain Kassel was waiting for Vader with important news.

"The emperor has been trying to reach you all day, sir," Kassel informed Vader. "I think he's...upset."

Vader digested this news with a nod of his head. Inwardly, however, he could feel his insides tighten. *What now?* he wondered as he headed to his office. *What have I done this time?*

Luke and Leia watched him go, and then turned to Kassel when he was out of earshot. "Does the emperor get upset with our father often?" Leia asked.

Kassel looked down at the child, wondering how much he ought to tell her. How would these innocent younglings feel if they knew what he did? How Emperor Palpatine was a sadistic monster who took great pleasure in torturing their father emotionally, physically and psychologically at every opportunity?

"You'd have to ask your dad about that, Leia," Kassel finally replied noncommittally. "You two have homework?" he asked, deciding it would be prudent to change the subject.

"Yeah," Luke grumbled. "On the first day!"

Kassel grinned. "Well get to it," he said.

Luke and Leia exchanged a look and then made their way to their rooms. Both of them had sensed their father's apprehension and were concerned about him. If they didn't know better, they'd have thought that their father was afraid of the emperor; but that simply wasn't possible. Their father was Darth Vader. He wasn't afraid of anything. Was he?

Vader knelt on the floor for what seemed to be an eternity before the emperor's image finally coalesced before him. Vader had long suspected that Palpatine made him wait so long in this uncomfortable position because it was so uncomfortable. The prosthetic legs he'd been fitted with ten years earlier were not quite a perfect fit, and thus kneeling was difficult and painful even for a short time.

"What is thy bidding, my master?" Vader began, using the ritualistic Sith greeting.

"You have been neglectful, Lord Vader," Palpatine began without preamble. "I have been waiting for hours to hear from you."

"Forgive me, Master," Vader replied, his apprehension growing as he sensed Palpatine's anger. "I was in meetings all day and I..."

"Silence!" the emperor snapped. "I don't want to hear excuses, Vader. The report I needed for this morning, where is it? You were supposed to have sent it to me yesterday."

Vader was silent for a moment as he tried to recall which report the emperor meant. Mindful that the emperor was no doubt trying to probe his mind, Vader surreptitiously raised his mental barrier to prevent it. "It is on my desk," Vader replied. "I finished it last night. I will send it at once."

Palpatine said nothing, but simply fixed his withering stare upon Vader. "It seems quite clear that having your offspring living with you is making you neglect your duties, Lord Vader," Palpatine snapped.

"No, that isn't it at all," Vader said a little too quickly.

"Silence!" the emperor commanded. 'I know exactly why you want those brats,' he continued, his voice heavy with scorn. "They make you think of her, don't they? They make you think of that slut you married, don't they?"

Vader could feel his blood pressure rising hearing the emperor speak of his beloved angel in such terms of contempt. "No, they do not," he lied.

"Of course they do," Palpatine continued. "They remind you that you were once a man," he added with a sneer.

Vader made no reply, the emperor's comments cutting him deeply. He'd felt like half a person since Mustafar, and had asked his physicians more than once if anything could be done to repair his grievous injuries. But nothing could be done, as the emperor took great delight in pointing out.

"Send that report immediately," Palpatine finally snapped, growing tired of the game he was playing with his apprentice. "And if this happens again, you may find your living arrangements will change," he threatened.

"It will not happen again," Vader assured him. "I promise you."

"See that it doesn't," Palpatine snapped, and then faded from sight.

Vader remained on his knees, too angry and too shaken to move for a moment. Hatred surged through him, filling every corner of his being. *You will not take my children from me*, he vowed silently; *I will kill you first, my master. You stole their mother from me; you will not take them too!*

Rising to his feet slowly, Vader left the room and headed to his private quarters, deciding that in his current state of mind he needed to stay away from the twins. He had no wish to frighten them, and that is what he feared would happen were they to sense the intensity of his emotions.

But Luke and Leia had already sensed it, and both looked up from their homework as they did so.

"Luke, what is going on?" Leia asked quietly, a frown creasing her brow.

Luke shook his head. "I don't know," he replied. 'Father is very angry,' he added. "I've never felt such strong emotions from him."

“Neither have I,” Leia agreed. ‘It’s the emperor,’ she added, lowering her voice. “He hates him, I’m sure of it.”

“But isn’t the emperor his boss?” Luke asked.

“Yes,” Leia replied, ‘but he once told me that the emperor was the one who had lied to him about us being dead,’ she continued. “He told Father that Mother had died before we were born, and Father spent the past ten years believing we were dead.”

Luke was startled to hear this. “You mean... we were raised apart because of a lie?” he asked.

Leia nodded. “Is it any wonder he hates the emperor so much?”

Luke shook his head. “So why does he do what the emperor tells him to?” he wondered. “Why doesn’t he just quit?”

Leia smiled at her brother’s naivety. “I don’t think it’s quite that easy, Luke,” she replied. “Although I have to admit that I don’t begin to understand the whole Force thing that Father referred to the other night.”

“No, me neither,” Luke admitted. “But he did say he’d teach us about it,” he remembered.

Leia nodded. “Yes, he did,” she replied. She looked towards the door. ‘I wonder if we ought to see if he’s okay,’ she wondered aloud. “I’m worried about him.”

“Yeah, me too,” Luke said. He stood up. ‘Come on,’ he said. “Let’s go.”

Leia looked up at him. She was seeing a different side of Luke, a decisive, take charge side that she hadn’t seen before. “You sure we should?”

Luke nodded. “He needs us, Leia,” he told her. “I can feel it.”

Leia stood up. “So can I,” she said. “Let’s go.”

Chapter 17

Seventeen

Luke and Leia followed their father's Force signature to the one room in the complex where they were not allowed: his private quarters. They stopped at the door as indecision overcame them.

"He told us not to go in there," Leia reminded her brother.

"I know," Luke replied, looking at the door. "But he's in pain, I can feel it."

Leia nodded. "Yes, so can I," she replied. "What did the emperor do to him?"

"I don't know," Luke replied, "but I plan to find out," he added, proceeding through the door. Leia had no choice but to follow him.

The inside of their father's quarters was as Spartan and utilitarian as they expected it to be. In the far end of the room, however, was a large spherical pod that neither of them had ever seen before. They were curious, as ten year olds tend to be, and approached the pod cautiously.

"Where is he?" Leia asked.

"I think he's in there," Luke said, indicating the pod. "Didn't he say there was only one place he could take off his mask?"

Leia looked at her brother with wide eyes. "You think he's taken off his mask? In there?" she asked.

Luke shrugged. "I don't see him, do you?" he asked. "Where else would he be?"

"Maybe there's another exit," Leia suggested. "I'm not sure he's even in there, are you?"

Luke looked at the pod. Although he sensed his father's presence, his own ability to focus on the Force wasn't nearly developed enough to know for certain where he was.

"No," Luke admitted. 'You're probably right,' he added. "He's probably gone out through another door, maybe a secret door," he added, the thought of such a thing in his own home very exciting to him. He looked back at Leia. "You want to check this out?"

Leia shook her head. "No way!" she said. 'We should leave,' she said, turning to go, but stopping when she noticed that Luke wasn't following her. "Luke, come on! If Father catches us in here he'll be angry!"

"He won't," Luke said. "You just said yourself he left through a secret door."

"I said *maybe* he did," Leia reminded him. "Luke, don't touch anything!"

Luke had always been a curious boy, and it had landed him into trouble on more than one occasion. The pod was simply too fascinating for him to walk away from without investigating. And so when he saw what appeared to be a means of opening the pod, he felt

compelled to activate it. The result was loud and instantaneous as the pod's upper hemisphere began to lift away. But the twins didn't stick around to see what was inside, for they were both out the door before their annoyed and astonished father could reprimand them.

Vader had not sensed his twins' outside the pod, for he was almost asleep. But there was no doubt who it was that had entered his quarters uninvited and activated his hyperbaric chamber. As soon as his helmet was secure on his head once more, Vader left the pod and went after the twins, not sure whether to be angry with them or impressed by their audacity. Seeing that they were not in the corridor, Vader simply followed the trail of heightened emotions, namely panic, to the twins' room where he found them pretending to be engaged in their homework.

"Luke, Leia," Vader said as he stood in the doorway. "Come here."

The twins looked at each other. *The jig is up*, they both realized.

Vader waited as Luke and Leia made their way over to the doorway, neither of them looking him in the eye.

"Why did you disobey me?" he asked in a tone that brooked no denial.

The twins looked at one another briefly, as though conferring upon one another.

"Answer me!" Vader demanded.

"We were worried about you," Leia replied, facing her father at last, willing herself not to be unnerved by the tone of his voice. "And we wanted to make sure you were okay."

Vader was not prepared for this response, and said nothing for a moment.

"We could feel that you were upset," Luke said, picking up where his twin had left off. "We only wanted to see if we could help. We didn't mean any harm."

Vader sensed the truth behind his twins' words, and was once again undone by the purity of their goodness and innocence. "You needn't have been concerned," he said at last, starting to turn away.

"What did the emperor say to you to make you so sad?" Luke asked.

Vader stopped in his tracks, once again unable to respond. What could he tell them? How could he tell these innocents how he served the devil himself?

"It is not your concern, Luke," Vader said at last. "Go back to your homework."

"It is our concern," Leia insisted. "You help us when we're sad, and now we want to help you. Why won't you let us?"

Because no one can help me, my precious ones, he thought sadly. "Go back to your homework," he repeated, his tone much softer this time. "Dinner will be ready soon."

This time he walked away, leaving Luke and Leia more perplexed than ever by the enigma who they called Father.

Naboo

It was late, and yet Sola was unable to even think of sleep. She had not been able to stop thinking about what she'd heard on the holonet the previous day. What if it was true? What if the twins were alive, and had been living with their father all this time? Was it Vader who was behind the whole plot to keep Padmé away from them?

"You coming to bed, hon?" Darred asked as he stood up with a yawn.

"Yes, in a bit," Sola replied. "I want to check the news first," she said, turning on the holovision.

Darred was growing concerned, for his wife was becoming obsessed with what she believed was a grand conspiracy. He had contacted his friend who lived on Coruscant, who knew nothing about Darth Vader having children, and hinted that Darred was crazy for even suggesting it. Sola hadn't been convinced by this, however, and was determined that there was a hidden truth somewhere. And if Darred knew his wife at all, he knew that she wouldn't rest until she'd uncovered it. The Nabberrie women were nothing if not tenacious.

"You're not going to see Luke and Leia, if that's what you think," Darred told her. "I told you what Remy said."

"I know what he said," Sola replied, flipping to a news station. "That doesn't mean it isn't true."

Darred shook his head in frustration. He wished that Sola's parents were still alive, for he felt certain that they would be able to talk some sense into her. He certainly couldn't. He sat back down beside his wife, wanting to ensure that she didn't stay up half the night waiting to see proof of her wild theory.

Two hours passed, and besides the usual imperial propaganda that the news was rife with, there was nothing that even hinted of Darth Vader being a father. Darred had begun to drift off to sleep when a shriek from his wife woke him up with a start.

"Darred!!" Sola cried, pointing to the holovision. "Look! I *told* you! I *knew* it!!"

Darred looked with utter shock at the screen where an image of Darth Vader being embraced by a young blond haired boy was being played. And then a young girl joined them, a young girl who bore a shocking resemblance to Padmé. *It was true...*

"You monsters," Sola whispered as tears rolled down her face. "The twins have been alive all along, and you've kept them from their mother! Well no more," she vowed. "Padmé will finally learn the truth. The twins need their mother, and she needs them."

Darred looked at his wife. "And how do you think she'll get them away from Vader?" he asked. "We're talking about Darth Vader here, Sola," he reminded her. "He's a very powerful man."

"I know how powerful he is," she retorted. "But how much will all that power mean when I tell Padmé about this? Do you think she's going to let him have sole custody of them without a fight?"

Darred frowned. "I don't know if that's a good idea," he said. "What could she do, even if she knew?"

“She could make his life a living hell, that’s what she could do,” Sola replied with a hint of a smile. “And that’s exactly what he deserves for what he’s put her through.”

Darred couldn’t deny this, and knew that there was no sense trying to talk Sola out of this course of action she’d decided upon. After all, Sola was a Naberrie, and Naberrie women were notoriously tenacious.

“We’ll go up in the morning, then,” he said at last. “I just hope you’re not making a big mistake, Sola.”

Coruscant

It was late, and the twins were sleeping when Vader took a break from his paperwork. He’d made sure that the report had been sent off, admonishing himself for letting it slip his mind to do so earlier in the week. Having two children was turning out to be far more work and far more demanding than he’d anticipate.

Having spent nearly three hours at his desk, Vader decided to take a short break and watch the late news on the holonet. His back ached from sitting for so long, and he welcomed the comfort of the large easy chair.

“Is there anything you need before I turn in for the night, sir?” Captain Kassel asked as he appeared in the doorway.

Vader looked over at him briefly as he turned on the holovision. “No,” he said. “You may retire for the night, Captain.”

“Thank you s...” Kassel stopped as he stared at the screen. “Sir, look!”

Vader turned to look at the image that had Kassel so rattled and felt himself grow angry as he did so. There was Luke, hugging him openly, with Leia not far behind. *Parasites!* His mind shouted angrily.

“Where did that come from?” Kassel wondered aloud. “How did they...”

“Clearly they were waiting for us outside of the school,” Vader replied. ‘Maggots,’ he growled. He thought for a moment, and then looked at Kassel. “I want you to find an officer to guard my children,” he said. “A clone isn’t good enough, I want someone who can think,” he added. “Someone clever and resourceful, someone who isn’t afraid to shoot first and ask questions later.”

“I understand, sir,” Kassel replied.

“I want this man to keep the media as far from Luke and Leia as possible,” Vader continued. “I will not have those parasites making money on turning my children into the objects of idle gossip.”

“Of course not, sir,” Kassel concurred. “I’ll start recruiting someone tomorrow first thing.”

Vader nodded. “I want someone in my office by nightfall,” he said. “Is that clear?”

“Perfectly, sir,” Kassel replied, decking that he would not get much sleep that night after all.

Naboo

Early morning sunlight twinkled on the placid surface of the lake as Sola and Darred made their way up to the abbey. Sola hadn't slept more than a few fitful hours the previous night, for her mind was troubled by the news she'd learned the previous day. Who had done this to her sister? Who had lied to her in this insidious manner? Who had told her that Luke and Leia had died, and who had taken them from her all those years ago? And, more immediately, how did they end up in Vader's custody? Had he had them all along? If so, Padmé would have a very difficult time gaining custody of them. *But if I know my sister, she will put up one hell of a fight*, Sola reflected grimly.

The abbey came into view and Sola looked over at her husband. Darred hadn't said anything more about his misgivings, but she knew how he felt. Sola would not reconsider her actions, however, and felt certain that she was doing what was best for her sister.

"She'll be surprised to see you again so soon," Darred remarked.

Sola nodded. "Yes, she will," she agreed. "I only hope she believes me," she added.

Darred frowned. "Why wouldn't she?"

Sola shook her head. "She hasn't been the same since she lost the twins," she replied. "She's not the same woman she was ten years ago, Darred. This may come as too much of a shock to her for her to believe it."

"Then maybe you shouldn't tell her," Darred countered.

"No, she has to know," Sola replied. "The twins need their mother, and she needs them. It will be a shock, but she needs to know, I feel certain of it."

Darred was correct; Padmé was surprised to see her sister back so soon. Not only that, she was alarmed.

"Sola, what brings you back so soon?" Padmé asked. "It hasn't been a month," she added, knowing that her sister never came more frequently than once a month.

"Padmé, sit down," Sola said. "There's something I have to tell you."

Chapter 18

Eighteen

Naboo

Padmé sat down, her sense of alarm growing as she did so. “You’re scaring me, Sola,” she said. “What is it? What’s going on?”

Sola sat down beside her sister and took her hand. Now that the moment was upon her, she found that the words she needed eluded her. Was Darred right? Would it be better not telling her? Would the knowledge that she’d been lied to this way destroy her already fragile spirit? *No, she needs to know, she has a right to know, and I’d never forgive myself if I let her live without telling her the truth.*

“I saw something on the holonet last night, Padmé,” she began. “Something that will be hard for you to believe. If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn’t have believed it myself.”

Padmé frowned. “What did you see?”

“It was Vader,” Sola said, feeling her sister tense up at the mere mention of his name.

“What about him?” Padmé asked, her frown deepening.

“Padmé, he has the twins,” Sola told her. “He has Luke and Leia.”

Padmé stared at her sister, not understanding what she’d just been told. “What do you mean, he has them?” she asked slowly. “Luke and Leia are dead,” she said, the words still managing to create a lump in her throat, a waver in her voice.

Sola shook her head. “No, they’re not,” she said. “I saw them, Padmé. They’re alive. I don’t know anything more than that, just that they’re alive and that Darth Vader has them.”

Padmé shook her head. “You’re wrong,” she said, standing up slowly. “You’re wrong! They’re gone, Sola, they’re dead! They died when they were born, remember??”

“I know that’s what we’ve believed all these years,” Sola said, looking up at her sister earnestly. “But you were lied to, Padmé. Someone lied to you; someone you trusted lied to you and took Luke and Leia from you.”

Padmé continued to shake her head. “No, it’s not true, it’s not true,” she repeated over and over. “Vader is trying to trap me, don’t you see? He’s found out that I’m alive, and he’s trying to lure me out of hiding. That has to be it!”

Sola closed her eyes with a deep sigh. Padmé’s deep seated hatred of her husband had created within her a tremendous sense of paranoia where he was concerned, and that paranoia was blinding her to the truth. “Padmé, I saw them,” Sola said gently. ‘Luke is blond with blue eyes, like An... like his father,’ she said. “And Leia... she’s the very image of you at that age, Padmé. It has to be them!”

“No, it doesn’t have to be them,” Padmé countered, starting to grow angry at her sister’s insistence. ‘Vader has endless resources,’ she said. “He could search a thousand planets for children who would look like they would have,” she said. “It’s a trap, Sola! Why can’t you see that?”

Sola stood up. She had no answer for Padmé’s question, and wondered whether Padmé would accept it even if she had. “I’m sorry, Padmé,” she said. ‘It wasn’t my intention to upset you,’ she continued. “But I thought you needed to know the truth.”

Padmé shook her head as hot tears rolled down her face. “I want you to go,” she said. “I don’t believe you, and I resent that you would try to convince me otherwise.”

Sola felt her own eyes fill with tears. *Oh Padmé, what’s happened to you? Where are you?* “I’m sorry you feel that way,” she said quietly. ‘I love you, Padmé,’ she added, emotion filling her voice. “I would never do anything to hurt you, I hope you know that.”

Padmé said nothing in response, and simply watched as Sola left, her body trembling with emotion.

Tatooine

Bail Organa had never expected to hear from Obi-Wan Kenobi again, not since the day they had taken the Skywalker twins from Pollis Massa. But Kenobi had contacted him, using a secure channel to avoid detection, with dire news. But Organa already knew what Kenobi had to tell him, that the Lars’ were dead. What Kenobi didn’t know was that Luke and Leia were now living with their father, that their worst nightmare had come true. Such news was best told in person, and not only for security reasons.

Leaving the small hangar bay in Mos Eisley, Organa looked around. He felt a little uneasy at the sight of so many dangerous looking beings, who eyed him with hostile curiosity. And then he heard a familiar voice.

“Welcome to Tatooine, Senator Organa.”

Organa turned to see Obi-Wan Kenobi standing beside him. The first thing he noticed was how much Kenobi had aged; it seemed that twenty years had elapsed since they’d last seen one another rather than just ten.

“Obi-Wan,” Organa said, “thank you for meeting me.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “Let’s go somewhere to talk,” he said. “We have plans to make.”

Organa nodded, wondering what exactly could be done at this point. But then again, Obi-Wan was a Jedi, and a very resourceful one at that. If anyone could fix this enormous mess, it was him. “Lead the way,” he said at last.

Coruscant

Leia sat on the edge of one work table as she watched Luke work on the model he’d started a few days earlier. She was impressed by his skill, and wished she herself had inherited their father’s gift of engineering.

“That’s really cool, Luke,” Leia said as Luke held up the model to inspect it. “I could never build something like that.”

Luke looked up at her. "Sure you could," he replied. "Dad could teach you how. He can build anything."

Leia nodded. "I guess I could," she said. 'He's so busy, though,' she added. "I hate to bug him."

Luke smiled. "He would love it, trust me," he replied. "Any excuse to get him in this room works."

Leia laughed. "I wonder who this new body guard is that Captain Kassel found for us," she remarked.

Luke shrugged as he set the model down once more. "What's the big deal, anyway?" he asked. "Our dad is famous. Of course the holonet is going to want to put stories about him on the news."

"I think he realizes that," Leia replied. "It's us he's worried about. He doesn't want us being chased by reporters, Luke. He wants us to have a normal childhood. Well, as normal as it can be considering our father is Darth Vader."

Luke nodded without looking up. "Do you ever wish our mom was alive, Leia?" he asked.

"All the time," she told him. And then she remembered the holovid. "Artoo," she called. The little droid rolled over from the other side of the room.

"Play the holovid Naboo One," she commanded.

"What's this?" Luke asked as the droid complied with Leia's command.

"Just watch," she replied.

Luke watched as an image of a beautiful young woman appeared, and then a young man at her side. "Is that... are they..." he asked, astonished by what he was watching.

"That's our parents on their wedding day," Leia told him, not taking her eyes from the holo which she had watched in secret several times already. "Isn't she beautiful?" she asked in awe.

Luke nodded, a feeling of familiarity coming over him. "I've seen her," he said, "in my dreams."

Leia looked at him in surprise. "You have?"

"Yeah," Luke replied. 'I've dreamed of her lots of times, ever since I can remember,' he said. "Now I know why," he added.

Leia nodded. "You look so much like Dad," she said with a smile.

Luke smiled, pleased she thought so. "I hope I get as tall as him one day," he remarked.

The holo ended, and they both remained silent for a few moments. Although neither of them had ever known their mother, both felt her absence in their life keenly.

"I see you're model is coming along nicely," Vader said as he entered the room.

Luke looked up. "Yeah, it's almost done," he said.

Vader held out a hand and brought the model to it effortlessly. The twins watched as he examined it closely. "Excellent craftsmanship," he commented. "I'm impressed."

Luke smiled broadly, his father's praise doing wonders to bolster his ego. "Thanks Dad," he said.

Vader looked up from the model, surprised by the less formal familial term.

"How do you do that?" Leia asked.

Vader looked at her. "It's easy," he said, floating the model back to the table. "Both of you have the ability to learn how to it, quite easily," he added.

"We do?" Luke asked in amazement. "Really?"

Vader nodded. "Yes, really," he said. "Haven't you ever wondered why it is you two can sense how the other is feeling, or what I am feeling? Or how you can predict what someone will say before they say it?"

"Yeah, I've always been able to do that," Luke remarked.

"So have I," Leia added.

"That's the Force," Vader told them. "Both of you are very strong with the Force, just as I am. It's in your blood, it's part of who you are."

Luke hated to admit his ignorance, but felt he had no choice. "What is the Force?" he asked.

Vader hesitated before replying. Would teaching his children about the Force be asking for trouble? And yet, how could he deny them their birthright? They were both already so Force sensitive, that perhaps it was time to teach them, to show them how to shield themselves from the emperor, to show them how a lightsaber works, to show them how to kill with one...

"Come with me," he said to his children. "Both of you. I want to show you something."

Tatooine

"How did this happen?? This is a nightmare," Obi-Wan said, shaking his head woefully.

"I never should have brought Leia to Coruscant," Organa replied. "But Vader never attends those meetings, never! How was I to know he would choose that particular day to do so?"

Obi-Wan sighed, running hand over his graying beard thoughtfully. "There's no sense blaming yourself now," he told Organa. "What's done is done. I should have kept closer tabs on Luke, and known he was leaving the planet. I should have followed them to Coruscant, I never should have let him leave the planet in the first place."

"None of us predicted that this would happen, Obi-Wan," Organa replied. "But it's done, and now we have to fix it. I was planning to go to Naboo when you contacted me."

"Naboo?" Obi-Wan asked. "You don't mean to tell Padmé about this, do you?"

"Of course I do," he replied. "Don't you think it's time she was told the truth? Now that Vader has the twins?"

"No," Obi-wan replied. "I don't. She would not react rationally, Senator, and you know it. She would only make things worse by rushing to Coruscant and confronting Vader. No, we must keep her out of this."

Organa frowned. "She's their mother, Obi-Wan," he said, his own sense of guilt filling him again. "She ought to be involved."

"You didn't see how Vader attacked her on Mustafar," Obi-Wan said, scowling at the memory. "If she came close to those twins and tried to take them from him now he'd kill her, I have no doubt of it. No, for her own sake, she's best left where she is, hidden and safe."

Organa wasn't certain he believed that Vader would actually kill his own wife, but reasoned that Obi-Wan was the better judge in this matter. "I don't like this," he muttered. "But if you think this is the best thing to do, I'll go along with you."

"Good," Obi-Wan replied. "The way I see it, it's only a matter of time before Vader turns his children over to the emperor, and we simply cannot let him do that. Luke and Leia are the only chance we have of destroying the Sith, and if they are consumed by the Dark Side, the Sith will rule forever."

Organa simply nodded, his own understanding of the workings of the Jedi and the Sith rudimentary at best. "So what do you have in mind?" he asked. "Surely you don't mean to try and abduct the twins," he added.

"Don't be absurd," Obi-Wan replied. "Vader's too clever for that. No, we need to be cleverer, more cunning." He was thoughtful for a moment. "You needn't be involved in this, Senator," he said after a moment. "I understand how careful you need to be about your public image."

Organa wasn't sure if this was a slight or not, and smiled to himself as he reflected upon his rather large involvement in the Rebel Alliance. "Don't worry about me, Obi-Wan," he said. "I know how to be discreet. Just tell me what you need from me."

Obi-Wan nodded, getting the impression that there was more to the senator than he realized. "Very well," he said. "The first thing we need is a plan, and the second thing I'll need is a means off of Tatooine."

Organa smiled. "I think we manage that," he replied.

Coruscant

"This is the ancient weapon of the Sith," Vader told his children as he ignited his lightsaber. "It was also used by the Jedi," he added, "although they never used the red blade."

Luke and Leia were amazed by the weapon, which they had never seen before.

"My adoptive father told me that you were a Jedi once," Leia told her father. "Is that true?"

Vader nodded. "Yes," he replied. "I was, once. But that was a long time ago," he told her, focusing his attention on the blade of his weapon. "I was a different person then."

"Did you really lead the Jedi purges?" Luke asked. "In school they taught us that the Jedi were trying to take over the galaxy and that you stopped them."

Vader wasn't certain how to respond to this. At one time he had believed that; but he'd also believed that he'd killed his wife. Now that he knew how the emperor had lied to him, he'd begun to question virtually everything he'd lived his life by for the past ten years. "I did lead the purges," he said at last. "Once I stopped being a Jedi, I had no choice but to do so."

"Why did you stop being a Jedi?" Leia asked.

Vader looked at her. Such a simple question, and yet the answer was more complicated than either twin could possibly realize. "It was not an easy decision," he replied. "I did it to save your mother," he added.

This disclosure was shocking to Luke and Leia. "How? How did Mother have anything to do with it?" Luke asked.

Vader said nothing in response, and both twins sensed that they'd gone too far.

"I'm not prepared to talk about that part of my life," Vader said, the memories of those days still too painful for him to dwell on. "Perhaps... one day."

Luke and Leia nodded, both knowing that when their father had put his foot down about something he meant it, and didn't push any further.

"Tell us about the Force," Luke said.

"Ah yes, the Force," Vader said. He looked over at a large spherical remote that sat idle on the far side of the room. 'Go over there and sit down,' he instructed his children. "Watch," he added as he summoned the remote with a movement of his hand. At once the remote moved to the center of the room and an indicator light came on. "Set level three," he commanded. "Begin."

Immediately the remote started emitting bursts of energy, lightning fast and rather dangerous looking in their intensity. Both Luke and Leia grew nervous until they saw what their father did next. Using the blade of his lightsaber, he deflected the blasts, moving with more quickness than they'd ever seen, anticipating every move the remote made. They watched in awe as the red blade of Vader's lightsaber flashed furiously, his weapon an extension of his hand. Finally, after almost ten minutes, the program ended, and the remote returned to its place on the far side of the room, harmless once more.

"That was incredible," Luke said as Vader came over to where his children sat.

"Did you...use the Force to do that?" Leia asked. "I mean, you knew where the thing was going to shoot even before it did."

Vader nodded. "The Force's energy is in all living things," he told them. "It surrounds us all, and binds us all. Its power is limitless to those who know how to use it."

"You mean anyone can use it?" Luke asked.

"No," Vader replied, turning off his weapon. 'There are some who are more in touch with the Force than others,' he explained. "There are microscopic organisms, medichlorians, that enable us to sense the power of the Force. They live within us, and the more of these organisms there are, the greater our ability to use the Force is. I haven't had either of your levels tested, but I'm certain it would be very high."

Luke and Leia were both rather overwhelmed hearing all this, and didn't quite understand it all. But they were fascinated, nonetheless, and excited to learn everything their father had to teach them.

"Will you teach us how to use the Force?" Luke asked.

Vader nodded, pleased that he'd managed to pique his children's interest. "I will," he replied. "One day you two will be as powerful as I am," he told them, setting a hand on a shoulder of each twin. *And together, we will destroy the emperor, and avenge our family once and for all.*

Chapter 19

Nineteen

Alderaan

"What's going on, Bail? When are you returning?"

"I can't say," Bail replied. "But trust me, okay darling? Obi-Wan knows what he's doing. He has a plan."

"What about the Senator?" she asked, using the code name they'd adopted for Padmé years ago. "I hope she figures into this plan."

"We're not telling the Senator," Organa replied. "We decided against it."

"What!?" Breha cried. "Are you both mad?"

"Breha, please," Bail replied, glancing awkward at Obi-Wan, who could certainly hear their holocommication. "It's for the best."

"You have no idea what that woman has been through," Breha continued. "Neither of you are mothers, you can't imagine how..."

"Breha, don't continue," Bail cut her off. "It's settled. I'll be back home within a week, possibly with a guest. Please make some arrangements."

Breha said nothing, and let her husband end the transmission without another word spoken between them. "Yes, make the arrangements," she said angrily. "We women don't hold any other place of importance, do we Master Jedi? Well I'll show you just what we can do without your interference," she said, standing up. She called in her handmaiden who came at once.

"What can I do for you, Your Majesty?" the young woman asked.

"Have my pilot prepare my private ship," she said. "I'm going to Naboo."

Coruscant

"Lord Vader, the officer you requested is here."

Vader looked up from his desk to where Kassel stood in the doorway. "Where is he?"

"Downstairs," Kassel replied. "Should I bring him up?"

Vader nodded. "Ask Luke and Leia to come in here before you do," he told the captain. "I want them to meet him as well."

"Yes sir, I'll tell them."

Luke and Leia were finished their homework and had started to drive See Threepio crazy, their favorite past time, when Captain Kassel appeared in the doorway.

"Luke, Leia, your dad wants to see you in his office," Kassel told them.

The twins looked at him, and then at one another, wondering what they'd done.

"I told you he'd find out you were messing around with the food replicators in the kitchen," Leia hissed to her brother as they walked to their father's office.

But their father knew nothing of Luke's stunt, and stood up when they entered his office.

"There's someone I want you to meet," he told them. "Someone who you are going to be seeing a lot of from now on."

"Do you really think this is necessary?" Leia asked. "The school has excellent security, and Captain Kassel..."

"Yes, I do," Vader interjected. 'Trust me, young one,' he added, trying to soften his tone, unsuccessfully. Instead he touched Leia's face lightly. "I will not allow the media to make your lives miserable," he told her. "This man will ensure that they stay well away from you. That is his job." He looked up as Kassel appeared once more in the doorway with a young officer in tow. *He looks like a boy*, Vader thought with annoyance.

"Lord Vader, may I present Lieutenant Han Solo."

Naboo— home of Sola Naberrie

It was late in the evening, and Sola's daughters were visiting. Their father had alerted them to what was going on, and the girls were concerned about their mother. They knew how protective she was of their aunt, and how much she worried about her. But tonight it seemed to both of them that Sola was sadder and more concerned than she'd been in the previous ten years.

"How was your exam yesterday?" Sola asked Pooja, trying hard to maintain light conversation.

"Hard," Pooja replied. "But I think I did okay. Only one more to go and I'm finished for the term," she added with a smile.

"Go ahead, rub it in," her sister grumbled. "I have three more, and two on the same day!" she complained.

Sola smiled. Her girls were the tonic she needed after the horrible visit she'd had earlier with her sister. She was beginning to wonder if she'd been wrong all along, if she should have listened to her husband's advice. Darred, to his credit, had not reminded her of that, and had simply done his best to support his wife during this crisis, just as their daughters were doing now.

"I suppose your father told you what happened earlier," Sola said, looking down into her tea cup. She knew that the girls were in the middle of exams; the likelihood of them leaving the dormitory in Theed for a spontaneous visit was quite remote.

Pooja and Ryoo looked at one another.

"Yes, I told them," Darred spoke up, knowing his daughters were unsure what to say.

"Aunt Padmé didn't believe you?" Pooja asked.

Sola shook her head. “No,” she said quietly. ‘I don’t know if she just can’t accept the truth or truly believes I’m lying to her,’ she added, a scowl forming on her brow. “But she hates Vader so deeply now that she seems convinced he’s out to trap her.”

“Do you think he’d do such a thing?” Ryoo asked.

Sola looked up at her daughter. “I don’t know,” she replied wearily. ‘All I know is what I saw; Darth Vader being embraced by a young boy who looked like he used to look,’ she added. “And a young girl who could have been Padmé when she was ten years old,” she concluded.

“Did Anakin even know Padmé was carrying twins?” Darred asked.

“I don’t know,” Sola replied. “That whole part of her life is so sketchy. I didn’t even know she’d married him until I got that message from her ten years ago.”

“Poor Auntie Padmé,” Pooja said, shaking her head. “She’s been through so much. Do you think if she finally accepts the truth that she’ll try and get custody of the twins?”

Sola looked at Darred, for they’d already had this same conversation. But before she could respond, the doorbell sounded.

“I’ll get it,” Darred said, standing up. He walked to the door and looked through the security window. A richly dressed woman stood there, one whom Darred had never seen before. “Can I help you?” he asked through the locked outer door.

“Yes, at least I hope so,” the woman replied. “I’m here to see the sister of Padmé Amidala.”

Darred frowned. “Padmé is dead,” he said automatically.

“Please, I know better,” the woman pleaded. ‘I’m Breha Organa of Alderaan,’ she said. “I’m here about Padmé’s twins. I was the one who adopted her daughter, Leia. I need to talk to Padmé, it’s very urgent that I see her, please!”

Darred was shocked by the woman’s disclosure, and for a moment he did nothing. And then he let her in, and showed her to the sitting room where Sola and their daughters were. All three women looked up when Breha entered the room, curious to see who the exotic stranger was.

“Sola, this is Breha Organa,” Darred said by way of introduction. “She’s here to talk to you about Padmé.”

Sola’s eyes widened as she looked at her husband. “Padmé is dead,” she said.

“I know she’s alive,” Breha cut in. “My husband, Bail Organa, was one of the two men who were with her when Luke and Leia were born.”

Sola turned her eyes back to Breha as she began to understand. “So you’re one of those responsible for lying to my sister?” she asked angrily.

“No, not me,” Breha replied. ‘My husband, Bail Organa,’ she told her. “He and Obi-Wan Kenobi, they’re the ones. Bail brought Leia to me when she was two days old, and told me that her mother had died in childbirth. I only learned the truth not quite three years ago when

Bail let it slip out. Believe me, had I known that your sister was alive I never would have kept her child from her all this time!"

"You say you've known for three years," Pooja remarked, "and yet you didn't tell her even then. Why is that?" she asked accusingly.

Breha lowered her eyes. "I know you must think me a monster for not doing so," she said quietly. "And quite frankly, I don't know why. Perhaps because I love Leia like she was my own flesh and blood and the thought of her being taken from me was unimaginable to me."

"So what has suddenly given you the strength to do it now?" Sola asked her voice heavy with contempt.

"Because Leia has been taken from me," Breha replied. "By her father, her biological father, Darth Vader."

Sola stood up at this point. "So it's true!" she cried. "He *does* have them!"

Breha nodded. "Yes, he has them both," she said. "Now you know why I must see your sister. She needs to know the truth."

"My wife already told her this truth," Darred said. "She saw Vader with the twins on the holonet, and told Padmé. But Padmé refused to believe it."

"What?" Breha cried. "She has to believe it!"

"She thinks Vader is setting a trap for her," Sola told her. "She won't even consider any other possible explanation."

Breha shook her head. "The poor woman," she said. "She's suffered so much because of this. I beg you; tell me where to find her. I can convince her; I was Leia's mother for ten years. I've even brought holos of her to prove it. Please, I'm begging you, tell me where she is. I can't live with this lie any longer."

Sola looked at Darred. *This is the answer*, she thought. *Padmé will listen to her; she won't be able to ignore the truth now.*

"I'll tell you how to get to Padmé," Sola said at last. "In fact, I'll come with you."

Coruscant

"Now that the media have learned of the existence of my children, they will no doubt be hounding them at every opportunity," Vader told Solo. "Your job will be to keep the parasites away from them."

Solo nodded. "Understood, sir," he said. "May I ask what lengths you are authorizing me to use to keep them away?"

"Whatever means necessary," Vader replied without hesitation. "I understand you're handy with a blaster," he added.

"Well, I guess you could say so," Solo replied, glancing nervously at the children.

"You *guess* so?" Vader asked. "Are you or aren't you?"

"I am sir," Solo replied at once. "Ranked first in marksmanship in my graduating class," he added.

That's more like it, Vader thought, nodding approvingly. "And you're a skilled pilot?"

Solo allowed himself a confident smile at this point. "Oh yes, sir," he replied. "My highest makers of all were in piloting. In fact, I..."

"That will do, Lieutenant," Vader said. He turned to Luke and Leia. 'My children will show you around the complex,' he said. "Take this opportunity to get acquainted," he added.

Luke and Leia nodded, relieved that the officer Kassel had selected was young and seemed pretty cool.

"This way, Lieutenant," Leia said.

Han looked at Vader, and then followed the twins out of the room, wondering how he'd ended up being the baby sitter of Darth Vader's kids.

Naboo

Padmé was barely out of bed the next morning when one of the acolytes came to inform her that she had two visitors.

"Two?" she asked, setting down her hair brush. "Who are they?"

"Your sister is one," the woman replied, "but I'm afraid I don't know the other woman."

Padmé frowned. "It's too early for visitors," she said, "tell them to go away."

"I did tell them," the woman insisted. "I know you don't like surprise guests; but they were very insistent, Milady. They said it was of vital importance that they see you."

Not this again, Sola, Padmé thought irritably. "I won't see them," she said, folding her arms over her chest. "It's as simple as that. I..." she stopped as the door opened and Sola barged in, accompanied by another woman. A second acolyte followed a look of shock and mortification on her face.

"I'm so sorry," she said to Padmé. "I turned my back for one minute and they barged right in!"

"We wouldn't have done so without good reason," Sola said, looking at her sister. "Padmé, please. Hear us out."

Padmé shot daggers at her sister with her eyes, and then turned to the second woman. She recognized her at once. "Breha?" she asked. "Breha Organa?"

Breha nodded. "Yes, you remember me," she said, relieved. "I'm sorry to upset you this way, Padmé, but I really have to talk to you."

"If this is about that nonsense my sister spoke of yesterday, you've wasted your time," Padmé said.

Breha exchanged a quick glance with Sola, and then looked back at Padmé. "Padmé, I know you don't want to hear it, but your sister is absolutely right. Luke and Leia are alive, and Darth Vader has custody of them. And before you tell me I'm crazy, please, hear me out."

Padmé said nothing, for in her mind she's already decided that Breha was as deluded as Sola. But Breha wasn't family, and so she felt obligated to at least show her the courtesy of listening to her. "Go ahead," Padmé said, sitting down. "I'm listening."

Chapter 20

Twenty

Breha and Sola sat down on the small sofa facing Padmé, the look on her face doing nothing to give them confidence. And yet, both women were determined that Padmé accept the truth, and pressed on, despite the way Padmé was watching them with undisguised resentment in her dark eyes.

“Let me start at the beginning,” Breha commenced, “ten years ago, to the day that Bail brought me a beautiful baby girl. He told me that her birth mother had died within hours of her birth, and that she was orphaned. We had always wanted a little girl, and so I was thrilled. We adopted her, but we kept the name that her mother had given her when she was born. And that name was Leia.”

Padmé’s eyes widened ever so slightly at hearing this. “You adopted a baby girl named Leia?” she asked. “Is that supposed to be the proof you expect me to believe? There must be millions of girls named Leia in the galaxy.”

“Yes, I’m sure there are,” Breha continued. “But only one Leia Skywalker. Bail was there when you gave birth to your twins, Padmé, remember? He was there and he took Leia, your baby girl, to Alderaan.”

Padmé’s heart was starting to quicken within her as ideas starting formulating in her mind. She remembered Bail being there, but he wasn’t alone. Obi-Wan was there too, and he’d told her that the babies had died. Surely he wouldn’t have lied about such a thing; surely no one could be that cruel!

“Bail was mistaken,” she insisted, refusing to allow the possibility of such a cruel deception into her mind. “My babies died, Obi-Wan told me so.”

Breha shook her head. “Did you see them?” she asked. “I’m sorry to be so insensitive, but did you see them? Did you see their bodies?”

Padmé frowned. “No,” she replied, “Obi-Wan told me that...”

“He lied, Padmé,” Sola interjected. “He lied about their death, that’s why he said you shouldn’t see them. By then they were already gone, Leia to Alderaan, and Luke to Tatooine. Obi-Wan Kenobi himself took him there, where he was raised by Anakin’s step brother and his wife. It’s all been lies, Padmé, the Jedi wanted to keep the twins from you so they could use them against Vader and the emperor some day. Do you see that now? Doesn’t it all make sense now?”

Padmé was by now very agitated and stood up and walked over to the window. “It can’t be, it... it can’t be!” she said as the truth slowly started to sink into her brain. ‘No one would be so heartless; no one would be so cruel! To tell me my babies were dead and then steal them from me??’ She turned back to them. “It can’t be true!” she cried.

Sola could see that Padmé was starting to accept the truth, and stood up to go over to her. "I'm sorry, Padmé," she said gently. "But it is. They *did* lie to you, they *were* that cruel. They claimed that they were doing it for the safety of the twins, but..."

"The Jedi," Padmé interjected her voice full of anger and resentment. "The Jedi did this to me!! They took my babies! They lied to me and stole my babies!!" She looked at her sister as the full impact of what had befallen her hit her. "Oh Gods, Sola," she said softly as tears filled her eyes. "They're alive! They're out there and I've missed the first ten years of their lives!!" She looked over at Breha. "You stole the first ten years of my daughter's life from me!" she cried.

Breha stood up quickly. "Padmé, please," she replied. "I came here to help! Vader has them! He took Leia from us, and..."

"And that's the only reason you decided to tell me the truth?" Padmé shouted, fully irate now. "Otherwise you'd never have told me, would you? You'd have let me live out the rest of my life in misery and grief thinking my precious children were dead! Admit it!"

Breha felt wretched, but what Padmé was saying was absolutely right. If Darth Vader had never found out the truth, then neither would Padmé have ever known it. She lowered her eyes, unable to face Padmé's wrath any longer. "I'm sorry," she said, not knowing what else she could say. "I only learned of this horrible lie three years ago, Padmé. I thought you were dead when we adopted Leia, I swear it."

"Three years? You've known for three years and only just decided to tell me now?" Padmé cried.

Breha felt her eyes fill with tears. "I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry," she said, wringing her hands. "I've hated this lie, Bail knew it, but I guess I just loved Leia too much to let her go."

Her words did nothing to lessen Padmé's ire. "Don't you *dare* stand there and justify what you did to me!" she cried. "There's nothing in the galaxy that could justify it!"

"Padmé, listen to me," Sola said, taking her sister by the shoulders. "You have every right to be furious, but right now you have to think about the twins. Vader has them, Padmé, both of them."

Padmé looked up at her sister and nodded, feeling overwhelmed by everything that she was being bombarded with all at once. "He has no right to those children," she said acrimoniously. "No right at all." She stopped for a moment to gather her thoughts. "I need your help," she said, and then turned to Breha. "Both of you. I need you to help me get my children from that monster."

"I'll do whatever I can to help you," Sola said, and looked at Breha. "And so will Breha, won't you, your majesty?" she asked with disdain in her voice.

Breha nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, yes of course!" she averred. "I'll do whatever I can, but what can we do? Darth Vader is a powerful man! How do you think you will get the twins from him, Padmé?"

Padmé thought for a moment. "I don't know yet," she admitted. "Right now all I want is to be close to my children. I need to see them; I need to be near them. I don't care what the risks

are, I don't care what the cost. Find me a way to get close to them, Breha. You owe me at least that much."

"Yes, I do," Breha replied. She thought for a moment. 'I think I know a way,' she said, sitting down again. "Listen."

Coruscant

It didn't take Han Solo long before he came to realize just how unique each of Vader's children was. Though they were twins, they were completely different from one another except for one thing; they were both highly Force sensitive. Solo had never really believed in the Force, for since the extinction of the Jedi, it was never spoken of. But the Vader twins knew about it, and, from the little Solo had seen of them, they were very strong with it. He lost count of how many times one completed the sentence of the other, or of how many of his questions were anticipated before he'd even had the words out of his mouth. Solo had heard of such abilities, but, until now, he'd never met anyone who possessed them. And yet, it did stand to reason that they would. Darth Vader was very powerful, allegedly more powerful than any Jedi who'd ever lived. It only made sense that his children would be as well. It wasn't long before Han realized that he would have his hands full.

"Have a good day, kids," Han told the twins as he escorted them to the school. "I'll be here after school."

Luke and Leia exchanged a look before nodding their understanding. Both of them had grown quite accustomed to being picked up by their father, and had grown to look forward to seeing him in their school. The other children were always so impressed and even a little intimidated by the sight of him, even more so when the twins hugged him or he took their hands. But the reality of life as the children of Darth Vader was setting in, and Darth Vader was a busy man. Luke and Leia had known this all along, but it didn't mean that they liked it.

"I can't wait to go swimming today," Leia told her brother as they walked to class together. "Pati tells me that the pool is amazing."

Luke nodded, not wanting to tell his sister that the thought of swimming terrified him. He had never so much as seen a swimming pool, having spent the first ten years of his life on a desert planet. Still, how hard could swimming be? Soon they were joined by their classmates, and all thoughts of swimming were put aside for the moment.

Vader's residence

Vader was in communication with the emperor, growing more annoyed by the moment. "The situation on Dantooine is getting out of hand," Palpatine told him. "I want you to go there at once and restore order."

Vader nodded, suspecting that the emperor was looking for a way to separate him from his children. It seemed that Han Solo had come into their lives just in time.

"Yes my master," Vader replied. "I shall alert my star destroyer and leave at once."

Palpatine nodded, doing his best to read Vader's mind. He had begun to sense changes in his apprentice, and it concerned him. Having his children in his life was having a profound affect on Vader, despite the dark lord's denial that it was. *He cares about them*, Palpatine realized with disgust. *He's softening...* But he said nothing to Vader, not wanting to tip his

hand. *All in good time, my foolish, weak apprentice*, he thought as a sinister smile formed at the corner of his mouth.

“Once you’ve quelled the uprising, I want you to report to me here,” Palpatine continued.

Vader did not ask why and merely nodded in response. “As you wish,” he said finally. Palpatine’s image faded from view as Vader’s suspicions grew. He briefly considered bringing Luke and Leia with him, but thought better of it. The situation on Dantooine was no place for children. Still, the thought of being apart from them for more than a day or so bothered him tremendously. But there was nothing he could do, and so he simply headed to his office to contact the Star Destroyer *Exactor* and have them get ready for departure.

Naboo

Having bid an emotional farewell to the sisters, Padmé left the sanctuary of the mountains and returned to Theed with her sister and the queen of Alderaan. The sisters had furnished Padmé with a traditional habit, which served to disguise her for the duration of their journey. But this was only a temporary solution. For what she planned to do, a far more permanent disguise was necessary.

As they flew along, Padmé was quiet and contemplative, her mind full of unanswered questions. First and foremost on her mind were her children. What did they look like now? Would she know them when she saw them? How would she keep from blurting out the truth to them about who she was? She knew that she couldn’t let them know who she was, not yet, not right away. If they knew, then their father would know. And that was something she was not prepared for.

Facing Vader after all this time would be very difficult and very painful. Although she could no longer blame him for the death of the twins, she still harbored tremendous resentment towards him. How many nights had she been plagued with nightmares, where she saw his yellow eyes boring into her, felt his iron grip around her throat? *You destroyed it all*, she thought bitterly. *You destroyed our love, you destroyed our family; but I will not let you destroy our precious children*. Somehow she needed to get Luke and Leia away from him. But how? Vader was the second most powerful man in the galaxy. What chance did she have of gaining custody of the twins when their father controlled the courts? *No, not him, his master, that monster he serves*. Cold fear filled Padmé as she thought of Vader turning Luke and Leia over to Palpatine. *No, he won’t, I won’t let him, even if I have to kill him first*.

“Padmé? You okay?”

Padmé looked at her sister. “Yes, I’m fine,” she said. She ran a hand over her long braid. “I think I should color my hair,” she said.

Breha nodded. “Good idea. Cut it too,” she said.

Padmé looked down at the thick braid in her hand, the thought of cutting it making her throat constrict. *Ani always loved my hair*, she thought wistfully, remembering how many mornings he’d awaken with it draped over his body, of how many times he’d bury his face in the thick, chestnut tresses, luxuriating in its delicate scent and silken texture. *But those times are gone forever*, she reflected bitterly. *He threw them away along with everything else that mattered*.

“Yes,” Padmé agreed at last, pushing the thick braid over her shoulder again. “Good idea. Colored contacts too. I want to look like a completely different person.”

Breha and Sola nodded approvingly. They took hope from the renewed strength they were seeing return to Padmé. Now that she knew the truth, there would be no stopping her. *Watch out, Vader*, Sola reflected with a smile. *You’re in for the fight of your life.*

Coruscant— Veslack Academy

“I’m afraid Mr. Wagar is away today,” Miss Zadane told her class. Her announcement was met with a groan of disappointment. The children loved their physical education teacher almost as much as their own teacher. Luke however, was secretly pleased. No phys.ed. meant no swimming pool, and no swimming pool meant no one would discover his embarrassing secret.

“However,” Miss Zadane continued over the class had quieted down once more. ‘Mr. Aldsworth has agreed to take you to the pool,’ she told them. “So you won’t miss swimming after all.”

The class erupted into applause and cheers as the students stood up to get their backpacks. Luke stood up too, the anxiety that had filled him earlier returning once more. Leia sensed it, and looked over at her brother. But Luke was surrounded by friends and she couldn’t get his attention. Deciding that it wasn’t worth worrying about, she joined her own friends as the class formed a queue at the door.

The change room was loud and boisterous as the boys changed into their swimming trunks. Luke was hoping against hope that his trunks had mysteriously disappeared, but no such luck.

“You coming Luke?” one of the boys asked him.

Luke looked up. “Yeah, I’m coming.”

Vader’s residence

“I don’t know how long I’ll be away,” Vader told Captain Kassel. “Make sure Luke and Leia’s routine is undisturbed.”

Kassel nodded. “Will you be around long enough to say goodbye to them?” he asked.

“No,” Vader replied. “The *Exactor* is expecting me within the hour, but I...” he stopped as a strong tremor in the Force washed over him. He held onto the edge of his desk as wave after wave of sheer terror struck him. Immediately he knew from whence it had come, and ran out of the door, not even waiting to tell Kassel where he was going.

Panic filled Vader as he raced to the school, the Force signature of his son growing weaker. *What is going on??* He thought angrily, vowing to kill whoever was responsible. *Hold on, son*, he thought desperately, *I’m almost there.*

Vader followed his son’s Force signature to the large swimming pool located on the school grounds. The scene that met Vader’s eyes when he arrived almost made his breathing apparatus malfunction.

A group of children were gathered around Luke who was lying prone on the pool deck. A man Vader assumed was a lifeguard was trying to resuscitate the boy, who was unconscious. Vader rushed over, the children moving aside as he did so. As he reached Luke, the boy started to sputter and spew water forth from his mouth. When he saw his father, he opened his arms, needing to feel his strong, protective presence. Vader gathered Luke into his arms at once, comforting the boy as he started to cry.

“What has happened?” Vader demanded. He looked up at a rather alarmed looking man who he assumed was the teacher in charge. “What is wrong with my boy?” he barked loudly enough to make most of the children run away frightened.

“The... the boy nearly drowned,” the teacher said. “He didn’t tell me that he couldn’t swim.”

“He has lived on a desert planet for the past ten years,” Vader countered angrily. “How the hell would he know how to swim?? Did you think to ask him??”

“No, I just...” the teacher stopped as he felt the invisible grip of Vader’s fingers on his throat. “I’m sorry!” he sputtered.

“Dad, please don’t do this,” Leia said, appearing at Vader’s side.

Vader turned to her, and remembered that he was being watched closely by the children. He released Aldsworth at once, and the man fell to his knees, coughing and fighting for air. Vader looked down at his son, the fear of what so nearly had happened washing over him. “Are you alright?” he asked, running a gloved hand over Luke’s wet hair gently.

Luke nodded, but his eyes said otherwise.

“Why didn’t you say anything, Luke?” Leia asked gently, kneeling beside him. “You could have drowned!”

But Luke wasn’t ready to speak and simply nestled against Vader.

Just then Administrator Jeslow appeared. When he saw Vader, and the school’s councilor who was clearly shaken and rubbing his throat, he grew fearful.

“Lord Vader!” Jeslow said. ‘I came as soon as I heard what had happened,’ he added. “Is Luke alright?”

“He will be,” Vader said, standing up, his boy clinging to him. ‘Thanks to the quick actions of this young man here,’ he added, indicating the lifeguard. “But this man,” he continued, pointing to the teacher, “I want him fired, immediately.”

Jeslow looked over at Aldsworth, who had taken a seat. “Sir, this man isn’t our regular physical education teacher,” he explained. “He’s our school councilor, and...”

“And he’s an incompetent idiot whose negligence nearly cost my son his life!” Vader roared. “I demand that you fire him. I don’t need to remind you of what will happen to this institution if you don’t.”

Jeslow swallowed. “No, you don’t,” he replied. ‘Very well, sir,’ he decided at last. “I will terminate him immediately.”

Satisfied that justice had been served, Vader returned his attention to his children. “Let’s go home,” he said to Luke. ‘Go and get changed,’ he added. “I’ll meet you out front.”

Luke nodded, and, after wiping his tears on the back of his hand, headed to the change room. Vader watched him go, and then turned to Leia. “Why wouldn’t he have told anyone that he can’t swim?” he asked.

“I think he was embarrassed,” she said. “He’s trying so hard to fit in, Dad. I think he was afraid that people would laugh at him if he told them.”

Vader shook his head, his son’s low self confidence bothering him. And then he remembered; the *Exactor* was waiting for him, and the emperor was expecting him. *But my son needs me...*

“Dad, can I come home too?”

Vader looked down at his daughter. No doubt the entire incident had shaken her deeply. “Yes,” he said, “go and get changed. I’ll go talk to your teacher. Meet me there, and bring Luke.”

Leia nodded, and ran off to the change room, leaving her father with a serious dilemma on his hands.

Chapter 21

Twenty-One

"You're leaving? Today?? Right now??"

Vader nodded, doing his best to ignore the look of indignation on his daughter's face. "I was on my way when Luke got into trouble," he explained.

"Can't you... postpone your trip?" she asked.

"No, I cannot," Vader replied.

Leia expelled a loud breath, folding her arms over her chest and left the room. Vader watched her go, his frustration level growing. And then he looked down at Luke, who sat on the edge of his bed. The boy felt exhausted, miserable and disappointed all at once. And yet, he didn't want to let his father show how upset he was. The last thing he wanted was for his father to be disappointed in him.

Vader sat down on the edge of the bed. "I'm sorry," he said. "But this cannot wait, Luke. The emperor has made it very clear."

Luke nodded. "I know," he replied quietly. "I just wish you didn't have to go today."

Vader sighed, feeling utterly torn. "Son, tell me why you didn't tell your teacher that you couldn't swim," he said.

Luke looked up at him. "I...I don't know," he replied. 'I guess I just didn't want people to make fun of me,' he admitted. "I didn't want you to be disappointed in me," he added, casting his eyes downward once more.

Vader felt his throat constrict as feelings of protectiveness overwhelmed him. "You could never disappoint me, Luke," he said, lifting the boy's chin to look him in the eye. "Never. You're my son, Luke. You're a part of me and I love you," he concluded, surprising himself with the depth of the emotion saying those words elicited.

Luke's eyes filled with tears as he smiled up at his father. "Thanks, Dad," he said. 'I love you too,' he added, throwing his arms around his father's neck. "I'll miss you," he said softly. "When are you coming back?"

"I don't know," Vader replied. 'As soon as possible,' he added. He held his son for a moment longer, knowing that each minute was going to cost him dearly if the emperor learned of his delay. Besides, he still had Leia to deal with. "I must go," he said, releasing Luke and standing up. "I'll be in contact as often as possible," he told Luke.

"Okay," Luke replied, wiping his nose on the back of his hand. "Bye Dad."

Vader left Luke and walked through the adjoining room and into Leia's room, where she was seated at her desk, a frown of concentration on her face. Vader could sense his daughter's resentment and anger, and he simply stood for a moment, trying to formulate the right thing to

say to her. He hated the thought of leaving her feeling this way, and decided that he needed to risk a few more minutes to try and iron things out.

"I have to go now," he told her.

"Okay."

"I'm not sure when I'll be back."

"Okay."

Vader walked over to her desk, growing annoyed with her attitude. "Leia, look at me," he said.

Leia hesitated, but only for a moment, and looked up at him. The expression in her face reminded Vader so much of Padmé that for a moment he wasn't able to say a word. But then he pushed the memories of his beloved out of his mind and focused on the moment at hand.

"The emperor's orders cannot be ignored, Leia," he told her. "When he gives me a command, I have no choice but to obey."

Leia considered this for a moment, remembering back to how her father had felt after being in communication with the emperor several days earlier. "He hurts you when you don't obey, doesn't he?" she asked.

Vader wasn't sure what to say. Would hearing the truth make it easier for her to understand why he needed to leave? And yet, she was so innocent. How could he tell her such a thing? "The emperor is not a forgiving man," he said simply. "When he gives an order, he demands that it be followed. I have no choice, Leia. If you cannot understand that, then you will have a difficult time accepting your life here with me."

He started to walk away when Leia stood up. "Dad, wait," she said.

Vader turned to face her and waited for her to walk over to him.

"Just because I'm upset about you leaving doesn't mean I don't love you," she said, looking up at him.

Vader smiled wistfully under his mask, almost certain that he'd heard the very same words coming from Leia's mother on at least one occasion. He took her face in his hands. "I love you too, Leia," he told her. "And I'll return as soon as possible. Is that... acceptable?" he asked wryly.

Leia smiled. "I suppose so," she replied. "Bye Dad."

Theed

"Padmé, it looks....really different," Sola said as she stood behind Padmé, looking at the mirror.

Padmé stared at her reflection, hardly able to believe the image that she saw looking back at her. Her hair was now barely touching her shoulders, and straightened into a neat bob, complete with bluntly cut bangs that just reached above her eyebrows. But more alarming than the drastic new style was the color. Titian red: not too brassy to be unnatural looking, but certainly eye catching. Her eyes, normally a dark shade of brown, were now bright green,

accentuated by the bold make up the stylist had applied. All in all, she looked like a totally new woman. "It's perfect," she said finally. 'Just perfect.' She stood up from the chair and turned to Breha. "Is everything ready?" she asked.

Breha nodded. "Yes, the arrangements are all made," she said.

"Good," Padmé replied. She looked at Sola. "I have to go," she told her.

"I know," Sola said, taking her sister's hands. 'You do what you need to do,' she said. "Only know that I'm behind you one hundred percent."

Padmé nodded, and then hugged her sister. "I'm sorry I didn't believe you," she said. "I should have believed you," she added.

Sola smiled. "It's okay," she said. "You've been through Hell, Padmé. It's natural that you'd be a bit... paranoid."

Padmé pulled back and looked at her. "I suppose I was paranoid," she replied. "Thank you for setting me straight, and thank you for not giving up on me."

"You're my baby sister, Padmé," Sola replied. "I'd never do that."

Padmé smiled. "I'm lucky to have such a sister," she said. She looked over at Breha. 'Time to go,' she said, her anxiety over seeing her children getting the best of her. "I'll contact you when I get settled in," she said.

"Good," Sola said. "Good luck," she added, giving Padmé another hug.

Star Destroyer Exactor

"Welcome aboard, Lord Vader," Captain Ozzel said as Vader stepped off of the shuttle ramp. "We were beginning to wonder if something had befallen you," he added, hurrying to walk along side his commander.

"My delay was unavoidable," Vader replied as he strode purposefully out of the hangar. "Prepare to leave orbit at once."

"Yes sir," Ozzel replied. "Our course is already set."

"Good," Vader responded. "Once we're clear of the planet, I want maximum velocity for Dantooine. We haven't a moment to waste."

Coruscant

Padmé walked around the apartment, looking approvingly of the furnishings that Breha had provided.

"This is the best they could do on such short notice," Breha told her. "I hope it's alright."

Padmé could see just how desperately the woman was trying to make amends for the part she'd had in the great deception that had robbed Padmé

of her children for the first ten years of their lives. Breha had obviously gone to a lot of expense to acquire this posh apartment and all the amenities within it. Not only that, she'd seen to it that Padmé had a vehicle at her disposal, as well as a rather impressive wardrobe. All in all, the woman had worked a miracle in a mere twenty-four hours. But none of this

mattered to Padmé as much as the final piece of the puzzle; Breha had used her vast influence to get Padmé into a position where she could be close to Luke and Leia, working at the twins' school.

"Yes, this is fine," Padmé said at last. "And the job? I start tomorrow, right?"

"Yes that's right. Administrator Jeslow will be expecting you," Breha told her. "I told him that you've had vast experience in counseling children, and that you worked with children extensively."

"Won't he want to see some sort of credentials?" Padmé asked.

"Already taken care of," Breha replied. "All you need to do is show up there tomorrow morning and tell him who you are. You have the identification papers I had made up?"

"Yes," Padmé replied. *A new face, a new name*, she mused. *All fitting for a new life.* 'You've gone to a great deal of trouble, Breha,' she said. "I appreciate it."

Breha smiled wistfully. "It will take me a lifetime to make up for what I did to you, Padmé," she said. "Don't thank me, please. It's the very least I can do."

Padmé nodded, certainly not disagreeing with the woman.

"I'd better be thinking about getting home," Breha said, taking one last look around. "Please don't hesitate to contact me if you need anything. I've opened a bank account in your name, with a rather substantial amount to start you off. I understand they pay rather well at Veslack, so hopefully you'll be alright."

"You didn't need to do that," Padmé said. "I have plenty of money."

"Yes, I know," Breha replied. "But how do you access it without revealing your true identity?"

Padmé frowned. "Yes, you have a point," she said. "I wonder if there's any way to transfer it to this anonymous account," she wondered.

"I'll look into it," she said. 'But now I really must be going. Bail doesn't know about any of this, as you know,' she said. "I'm not sure what the fall out will be when he finds out."

"You did the right thing, Breha," Padmé assured her. "Don't let him try to tell you otherwise."

Breha smiled. "He's not a mother, Padmé," she said. "He has no idea what it's like..." She stopped as her emotions over losing Leia reared up once more. "I'll be in touch," she said, and headed for the exit.

Padmé watched her go, and then turned back to her new home. It wasn't exactly 500 Republica, but it was far more comfortable and spacious than the small quarters she'd inhabited for the past ten years. Walking out onto the small terrace, Padmé caught sight of the Jedi temple. A lump formed in her throat as a myriad of memories flashed through her mind, heralded by the sight of it. *I miss you, Anakin*, she thought sadly. *So much...*

Star Destroyer Exactor

Vader found himself unable to sleep on the voyage to Dantooine. It was not the prospect of quelling an uprising that was preventing it; it was certainly not the first time he'd been called upon to do so. He could not stop worrying about his children, and could not shake the feeling that he was leaving them vulnerable by leaving the way he had. But what choice did he have? When the emperor had agreed to allow Vader to keep the twins, he'd done so with a strict understanding that their presence in his life would not affect his duties. Vader was kidding himself to have ever thought that this wouldn't happen.

For the first time in a very long time, Vader had someone to worry about. More than this, he had someone to care about. It was a doubled edged sword, he'd decided, having these feelings again. For while having his children in his life was a blessing he'd never imagined he'd have, worry was something he'd never handled well.

Finally two days without sleep caught up with Vader, and he retired to the hyperbaric chamber that had been installed on board the star destroyer for his use. It was good to rid himself of the cumbersome helmet and mask if even for a short time. He smiled to himself as he recalled how the twins' curiosity had got the better of them, but the smile soon faded as he realized how close they had come to seeing him unmasked. Vader knew that his children wanted to see his face, but he was simply not prepared for that. Not yet. For although they knew that he'd been injured years earlier, he felt certain that neither of them were prepared to see the extent of those injuries. He wasn't sure he could handle to look of horror and revulsion in his children's eyes as they saw his scarred, ravaged visage. It hardly seemed possible that at one time he'd looked like Luke. *You were a different person then*, he reminded himself. *You were a man, not a cyborg, not a machine*. Rubbing his eyes tiredly, Vader forced these morbid thoughts from his mind and eventually drifted off to sleep.

I make my way over to the giant columns that I had just passed moments ago, trying hard not to run. And she is there. The joy I feel at seeing her is indescribable, and I embrace her tightly, afraid to let her go lest this all prove to be a dream.

"Ani! I'm so relieved you're home!"

"I've missed you Padmé," I tell her, holding her precious face in my hands. "I've missed you so much," I say, pulling her close to kiss her. She is uneasy, as she always is when I display my affection for her in public. But I don't care.

"There were whispers," she tells me, looking up at me. "That you'd been killed. I've been so scared that they were true."

"I'm back, I'm all right," I tell her, pulling her close again, my need for her too great to ignore. 'It feels like we've been apart for a lifetime,' I tell her, kissing her softly. "And it might have been... If the Chancellor hadn't been kidnapped. I don't think they would have ever brought us back from the Outer Rim sieges," I say, kissing her once more.

"Not here, Anakin," she says, pulling away.

"Yes, here," I insist, pulling her back into my arms. "I'm sick of all this secrecy, Padmé. I'm tired of the deception. I don't care if they know we're married."

Padmé's eyes widen in shock at my statement. "Don't say that, Anakin!" She says. I look at her, sensing that there is more to her nervousness than simply a kiss in public.

“What’s going on, Padmé?” I ask her.

She says nothing for a moment, which only serves to alarm me more. “What is it? You’re trembling.”

“I’m just so relieved to see you,” she tells me. “It’s been so difficult being apart from you for so long, especially now.”

“Why especially now?” I ask. “What is going on?”

“Ani, something has happened,” she begins. I feel my heart pounding within me— she’s found someone else.

“You’ve found someone else, haven’t you?” I ask her, barely able to get the words out. “The waiting is just too much so you...”

‘Anakin, how can you even think such a thing?’ she cries. “You know that my heart and soul belong to you and you alone! I would wait a thousand life times just to be with you!”

I lower my eyes, ashamed of myself. “I’m sorry,” I tell her softly. “It’s just that... I’m so afraid of losing you, Padmé. The thought of losing you is...”

“You’re not going to lose me, Anakin,” she tells me, holding my face in her hands. “I’m pregnant, Ani.”

Her words could not have shocked me more. She’s pregnant! I’m going to be a father! How will we hide our marriage now? How can we possibly keep this secret now? None of this matters... I’m going to be a father... I’m going to be a father!!

“That’s...” I stop, groping for the right word. “That’s wonderful!” I tell her, smiling broadly.

“What are we going to do?” she asks the fear clear in her eyes.

I take her gently by the shoulders. “We’re not going to worry about anything right now, all right? This is a happy moment. The happiest moment of my life.” I pull her into my arms, closing my eyes. The happiest moment of my life...

I take my wife home, anxious to be alone with my wife. Of course, now that she is pregnant, I’m unsure if making love to her is safe. We have been apart for more than five months though; I’m not sure either of us will be able to control our need for one another.

As soon as we are in the apartment, I pull her into my arms, giving her the long, unhurried kiss I’d wanted to give her earlier. Padmé runs her hands into my hair, kissing my back with equal ardor. After a few moments I bring my mouth to the side of her neck, the scent of her skin filling me with undeniable longing.

“Make love to me, Anakin,” she whispers into my ear. “It’s been so long since we’ve been together.”

I look down at her. “Is that safe?” I ask. “I mean... we’re not going to hurt the baby if we do that, are we?”

Padmé smiles. “No,” she assures me. ‘My doctor has told me it’s perfectly safe.’ A look of concern flits across her face. “Unless you don’t want to,” she adds.

I shake my head. "Oh I want to," I tell her, pulling her close to me again. "I just don't want to do anything that would hurt her."

"Her?" Padmé says, lifting her eyebrows. "What makes you so sure the baby is a her?"

I smile. "Father's instinct," I tell her.

She smiles. "Well my mother's instinct says it's a boy," she tells me. "We can't both be right."

I laugh. "No. I don't suppose so," I tell her, pulling her close again. "So you're sure about this, are you?"

Padmé nods her head. "Very sure," she replies. She takes my hand. "I've been so lonely without you, Ani," she tells me as she leads me to our bedroom.

I sit on the end on our bed as Padmé undresses. Normally by this point our clothes are in a heap on the floor, ripped in our haste; but I am still a little uneasy, despite my wife's assurances.

"I look a little different then the last time you saw me," she says as she puts her hands on her rounded belly.

I look up at her and smile. "You're every bit as beautiful, Padmé," I tell her. I reach up and put my hands on the sides of her belly where our child is growing. "I can't believe we're having a baby," I add.

"Are you happy?"

I nod, not taking my eyes from her blossoming body. "Yes, very happy," I tell her.

She must sense my reticence and moves closer to me. "Don't be afraid Anakin," she tells me, running her hands into my hair. "I need you, Ani..."

The power of emotions that his dream elicited woke Vader with a start. He was trembling, his eyes shrouded with tears. Will I ever get over her death? He wondered in anguish as he dropped his face into his hands. Will I spend the rest of my life being tormented by memories of her? Padmé, sweet Padmé, I'd give my own life if I could bring you back... I need you, our children need you, I can't do this alone...

Corsucant

Padmé awoke early the next morning, her sense of anxiety and excitement preventing her from sleeping much at all. She got out of bed and, after doing a double take at her own reflection in the mirror, headed to the fresher to get started with her day.

Administrator Jeslow arrived in his office at his usual time, thirty minutes before the bell, and was met there by his assistant.

"Ania Kinsky is here, sir," she informed him, handing him a cup of steaming hot caff.

"Who?" he asked.

"The new councilor," she reminded him. "Remember? The one Queen Breha asked you to hire?"

“Ah, yes,” Jeslow said. “Where is she?”

“In your office,” the assistant replied. “She’s been here twenty minutes already.”

Jeslow glanced at his wrist chrono. “Really? Well she’s certainly punctual,” he remarked as he headed into the office.

Padmé looked up as the office door opened and a man in his early fifties entered the room. She stood up at once to face him and put on her best professional smile. “Administrator Jeslow?” she said.

Jeslow, who was rather taken aback by how stunning his new teacher was, simply nodded.

“I’m Ania Kinsky,” she said, holding her hand out to him.

Jeslow smiled, suddenly wishing he were twenty years younger. “Welcome, Miss Kinsky,” he said. “It is, *Miss Kinsky*, isn’t it?” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied. “It is. I want to thank you for giving me this position so quickly. It means more to me than you can know.”

“Well, we needed a councilor,” he told her as he took a seat and invited her to do the same. “Our councilor had the misfortune of crossing a rather powerful man yesterday and, well... never mind. It’s not your concern,” he concluded, deciding if this young woman knew that the children of Darth Vader were attending this school she may not be as enthusiastic about her new position here.

“I suppose timing is everything isn’t it?” Padmé asked with a smile.

Jeslow nodded. “Indeed,” he replied. “Let me show you to your office,” he said, standing up. Padmé stood up as well as Jeslow opened the door. But before they could take a step out the door, a young man appeared dressed in athletic gear with a whistle around his neck.

“Ah, good morning Mr. Wagar,” Jeslow said.

“Hey,” the young man replied. “What the hell happened yesterday? What happened to Luke Vader?”

Padmé gasped audibly at hearing this, and both men turned to her. Upon seeing her, Wagar smiled, his question lost as he looked at her, admiring her openly.

“Hi,” Wagar said, holding out a hand to her. ‘I’m Len Wagar,’ he said. “I’m the physical education teacher here.”

Padmé was uneasy at how openly this man was checking her out, but she smiled and shook his hand. “I’m Ania Kinsky,” she replied. “The new councilor.”

“Right on,” Wagar said, smiling. “Welcome to Veslack.”

“Thank you,” she replied. “Did you say Luke *Vader*?”

“Oh, oh yeah,” he said, looking back at Jeslow, suddenly remembering him. “What happened? I heard the kid almost drowned.”

“Yes, he did,” Jeslow replied. ‘Fortunately one of our lifeguards was able to resuscitate him,’ he continued. He looked at Padmé, whose face showed clearly how shocked she was.

“Darth Vader’s children attend this school, Miss Kinsky,” he said. “Luke is his son.”

Padmé had to fight to keep her composure. *Luke... my poor Luke!!* “Is he okay? The boy?” she asked, trying to sound calm.

“Oh yes he’s fine,” Jeslow assured her. “Apparently he neglected to tell the teacher that he couldn’t swim.”

“It wasn’t me,” Wagar was quick to point out. “I wasn’t here.”

Padmé nodded, relieved that Luke was alright, but concerned that his life had been endangered. *Is this your idea of parenting, Vader?* She thought angrily, the thought of her precious children baring that awful name angering her. “Perhaps the boy will need someone to talk to about this,” she said. “No doubt it was very scary for him.”

“Yes, I’m sure it was,” Jeslow said. ‘I’ll suggest it to his teacher,’ he added. “Now right this way, Miss Kinsky,” he said. “I’ll show you your office.”

Padmé left with the administrator, all the while being admired by the young physical education teacher. *Miss Kinsky, is it?* He thought with a smile, leaning against the door frame as he watched Padmé walk away. *So much the better.*

Chapter 22

Twenty-two

Coruscant

Luke and Leia had returned to school the next day, already missing their father. Han Solo was proving to be quite tenacious, much to the twins' annoyance. Each of them had begun to wonder if the media would be any worse than him.

"Okay, see you two later," Han said as they entered the security gates. "It's the weekend, so maybe we can do something fun," he added, getting the feeling that the twins were already tired of him.

Luke and Leia looked up at him. "Really?" Luke asked. "Like what?"

Han shrugged. "I don't know, kid," he said. "We'll talk about it later, okay? Don't be late for class."

Luke nodded and he and Leia ran ahead to get to school, for the warning bell had already sounded.

"Is that the bell?" Padmé asked.

"Only the warning bell," Jeslow told her as they stood outside her small office. "That tells the students that they have ten minutes to get to class."

"So they're on their way inside right now?" she asked, feeling her heart begin to race.

"Yes," Jeslow said, "come with me, I'll show you."

Padmé followed along with the man to the front entrance of the school where she'd entered earlier. Whereas before it was deserted and quiet, now it was alive with children as they made their way into the school. Laughing children, arguing children, children who looked like they wanted to be anywhere but here, children with bright, eager faces; they were everywhere as Padmé's eyes darted frantically over the crowds, looking with longing for the faces of her precious twins. And then she saw them.

She saw Leia first, her face unmistakable even among the group of girls she was in. *She looks just like me!* Padmé thought excitedly. She had to fight to keep her composure as she watched her ten year old daughter who seemed to be the leader of her pack of friends. She walked with confidence and grace, her hair neatly arranged in a chignon trailing into a long braid down her back, the outfit she wore both stylish and tasteful. Padmé felt the tears rise to her eyes as she realized Leia was almost at the end of her childhood, and she'd missed almost every bit of it. *I have so much to make up for, so much catching up to do...*

It wasn't long before she saw a boy who had to be Luke, for he looked so much like Anakin had when she'd met him that she had to lean on the door frame for support. Unlike his twin, Luke walked like a farm boy, with a long, easy gait. He pushed a stubborn lock of blond hair from his forehead as he laughed with a classmate, his blue eyes dancing mischievously at

some secret joke they'd shared. Padmé wanted more than anything to run to her precious babies and gather them into her arms, to kiss them endlessly and learn everything there was to learn about them. But she was a stranger to them right now, and that was how it had to remain. At least for the time being.

"There's Vader's daughter, Leia," Jeslow pointed out, not realizing that Padmé needed no help in finding her. 'And that's Luke,' he said, indicating her son as he entered the school a few meters away from where they were standing. "They're really remarkable children, all things considered."

Padmé looked up at him. "All things considered?"

Jeslow nodded. "It's a long story," he said. "But suffice it to say they haven't had the most conventional childhood, either of them. They've only recently come to be in their father's custody, and Vader is raising them alone. I have no idea where their mother is. I think she's dead, actually."

Padmé nodded as her eyes sought out the twins once more before they disappeared from view. "I look forward to meeting them," she said. "No doubt they could use someone to talk to about all the changes in their lives."

"Yes, I'm sure they could," Jeslow agreed. "Come on, let's get you settled in. The bell will be going off again shortly."

Dantooine

It didn't take long for Vader to surmise that the situation on Dantooine was an enormous mess. He had long suspected that there was a strong rebel presence among the populace, though the emperor had not shared his suspicions. And so the situation had gone on without Imperial interference for close to five years. And this was the result. Vader was sorely tempted to simply use the star destroyer's enormous fire power to lay waste to the planet's surface; but that would only worsen things. The rebels were like parasites to Vader; the more you tried to eradicate them, the greater their numbers would become.

"Send a squadron to the City Hall," Vader told Ozzel. "I want the president and his party arrested and brought here to me."

"The president arrested, sir?" Ozzel said, shocked by Vader's aggressive move. "Surely he is not involved in..."

"Are you questioning my orders, Captain?" Vader barked.

"N-n-n-no, sir," Ozzel stammered, starting to perspire. "I'm merely pointing out that arresting him may create....bad feelings..."

Vader raised his hand and Ozzel's hands flew to his throat at once.

"Never question my orders," Vader told him, his voice full of anger. "If I need your advice, I will ask for it. Is that clear?"

Ozzel nodded.

"Then follow my orders," Vader snapped as he released the captain. "Now!"

Ozzel staggered for a moment, gasping for air, and then stumbled away to do his commander's bidding.

Vader watched with distain as the captain left the bridge, coughing loudly as he did so. He folded his arms over his chest and turned to the large window, staring at the planet below. He hated Dantooine, hated everyone who inhabited it, and everyone on board this ship just by sheer virtue of the fact that by being here he'd had to leave his children. *My son needs me right now*, he thought in frustration. *The first crisis we face and I am not there to help him through it*. Fists clenched tightly, Vader simply stood and waited, knowing he had no choice but to follow through with his orders, knowing the consequences would be dire if he did not.

Coruscant— Veslack Academy

Padmé had spent most of the morning tidying up the rather messy office that she'd inherited from her predecessor. It seemed a wonder that the man had been able to do his job at all with the state of disorganization that pervaded every part of the office. She was interrupted, and happily so, by an occasional visit from students, none of which, however, were the ones she longed to see. Several were there because they were being bullied, and a couple were bedwetters.

There was another visitor, however, that Padmé was not as anxious to see. Len Wagar, who seemed to have an inordinate amount of free time on his hand for a teacher, had dropped in three times by the time the lunch bell went. He had made his intentions quite clear within minutes of his first visit.

"So, Ania," he said, sitting casually on the edge of her desk, watching her tidy up. "You seeing anybody?"

Padmé was shocked by the man's boldness. "No," she said, not even turning to him.

Wagar smiled. "Awesome!" he said. And then a thought struck him. 'You're not married, are you?' he asked, knowing that many women left off the "Mrs." even when they were married.

Padmé hesitated a moment before responding to this question. *I suppose technically I am*, she reflected. And then she frowned. *No, the man I married is dead. Vader is not my husband*. "I'm a widow," she said at last. "My husband died ten years ago."

"Oh... uh... sorry," Len said, not quite sure what to say. "That must have sucked, eh?"

Padmé turned to him. "Yes, you could say so," she replied coolly.

Len was unnerved by the tone of her voice, and glanced at his wrist chrono. "Well, I guess I should get to class," he said, standing up. "Catch you later, Red," he said with a smile.

Padmé was confused by the nickname until she remembered her red hair. *Jerk*, she thought with a frown as she returned to her dusting.

Elsewhere in Veslack

Leia sat in her seat, not listening to her teacher. She felt a very strong wave of anger through her link with her father, and it concerned her greatly. Leia turned to Luke who sat at another group, and she could tell by the look on his face that he'd felt it too. She wished she

could talk to him about it, but it wasn't lunch hour yet, and the students were in the middle of a lesson.

Leia's momentary lapse of attention did not go unnoticed by her teacher, and, when the class started in on their work, she came over to Leia to speak with her.

"Leia, are you okay?" Miss Zadane asked quietly. "You seem a little out of sorts."

Leia looked up at her teacher, grateful for the woman's sensibility. "I guess I just miss my father," she told her. "He left yesterday on a mission. We don't know when he'll be back."

Miss Zadane nodded. "I understand," she replied. She leaned closer so that only Leia could hear her. 'You know Leia, there is a councilor on staff,' she said. "If you feel the need to talk to someone objective."

Leia frowned. "My father had Mr. Aldsworth fired, remember?" she replied, not relishing the thought of sharing her feelings with a man she hardly knew.

"Yes, I know," her teacher replied. 'Administrator Jeslow hired someone to replace him,' she explained. "Miss Kinsky," she concluded.

Leia nodded, happy to hear that the new councilor was a woman. "Thanks," she said. "Maybe I'll go later."

Star Destroyer Exactor

"I intend on reporting this treatment to the Imperial Senate!" cried the president of Dantooine as he and his cabinet were shoved into a detention cell. "This is outrageous! On whose authority are you..." he stopped when Darth Vader sopped into the corridor, answering the question with his huge, ominous presence.

"Spare me your virtuous protestations," Vader growled, stepping up to the man menacingly. "I want the names of the rebels in your government, and I want them now."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," the man insisted, summoning up his courage. "I know such a thing would be treason. Do you think I'm a fool, Lord Vader?"

Vader didn't reply, but merely sent the man flying to the far wall of the cell with a slight motion of his hand. "Yes, I do," he replied, walking over to him. 'Not to mention a traitor,' he added, watching as the man was helped to his feet by two of his companions. "I'm quite certain you're familiar with my reputation for gleaning information from prisoners," he continued. "We can do this the easy way, or we can do this the very, very painful way. It's your choice, president. What's it going to be?"

The president looked up at Vader and then glanced at his cabinet members nervously. "May I... consult with my cabinet first, Lord Vader?" he asked, sounding far less sure of himself than he had mere moments earlier."

"You have thirty minutes," Vader replied. 'I will return in half an hour,' he said turning to leave. "I hope in that time you will come to realize how wise it would be to cooperate, Mr. President."

Veslack Academy— Coruscant

Lunch hour had begun, and the students in Miss Zadane's class were making their way to the refectory. Leia was lagging behind, toying with the idea of going to speak to the school councilor. She needed to talk to someone; her adoptive mother back on Alderaan had always been a wonderful sounding board, and the two of them had spent many hours talking through Leia's feelings and problems. And as much as she loved her newly found father and brother, talking to them wasn't quite the same. *Miss Kinsky*, she thought, looking down the corridor to where the councilor's office was. *What could it hurt to talk to her?*

Padmé was just about to go to the teacher's lounge for a quick lunch when she heard a voice at the door. "Miss Kinsky? Can I come in?"

Padmé turned to the door, about to ask the child to come back in twenty minutes, when she stopped at the sight that met her eyes. It was Leia in the doorway. For a moment Padmé found herself unable to speak, and was certain that the girl would hear the wild pounding of her heart. But she collected herself, and gave Leia a smile.

"Yes, of course," she said at last. "What can I do to help you?"

Leia looked around the office briefly before sitting down in the chair Padmé offered her. "I just wanted to talk," she said, feeling a little awkward.

Padmé was thrilled. "That's what I'm here for," she said, fighting the urge to throw her arms around Leia and hug her tightly. "What is it you'd like to talk about?"

"My father," Leia replied. "I'd like to talk about my father."

Chapter 23

Twenty-three

Padmé did her best not to show her emotions, but it wasn't easy. "Your father?" she asked. "What is it about your father you'd like to talk about?"

"Well, first of all I should tell you who my father is," Leia began.

"I know who he is, Leia," Padmé replied calmly.

Leia frowned. "How do you know? And how do you even know my name?"

Think fast, Padmé, she thought. "Administrator Jeslow told me Darth Vader's children attended this school," she explained. "And pointed you and your brother out to me earlier. I suppose he thought I should know."

Leia nodded. "Probably thought you'd be scared," she commented, watching the woman closely for a reaction.

"Scared?" Padmé replied, sensing her daughter was testing her. "Why would I be?"

"Because my father is scary," Leia said.

"Are you scared of him?" Padmé countered.

Leia smiled, deciding she liked this woman's guts. "Not at all," she replied.

"Good," Padmé replied, relieved to hear it. "So what is it you want to talk about?"

Leia frowned, still sensing her father's anger. "I'm worried about him," she told Padmé.

"Why?"

"He left for a mission yesterday," Leia continued. "Even though Luke was still scared about what happened, and I didn't want him to go," she felt compelled to add as an aside.

"I heard about what happened to Luke," Padmé told her. "Is he okay?"

"Yes, he's fine," Leia assured her. "He's pretty tough," she added with a smile, obviously very proud of her twin.

Padmé couldn't help but smile. "So why are you worried?"

Leia sighed. "It's kind of hard to explain," she said. "You see, I...we both know how our father is feeling," she told Padmé. "And lately I've been feeling that he's angry. Very angry, and it scares me."

"Forgive me for pointing this out, Leia," Padmé said. "But it's my understanding of your father that he is often angry, isn't he?"

Leia frowned. "No," she replied instantly, and then thought better of it. "Well... I suppose it must seem that way to strangers. But I know him better."

“So I see,” Padmé replied. “So why does this worry you? Is the mission he’s on dangerous?”

“I don’t know,” Leia admitted. “He wouldn’t tell us anything about it, only that the emperor would be very unhappy with him if he didn’t go.”

It was impossible for Padmé not to react to mention of the emperor, and Leia sensed her reaction. “You don’t like him either, do you?” she asked quietly.

Padmé’s eyes widened. “I don’t know what you mean,” she replied, suddenly afraid.

“The emperor,” Leia said. “It’s okay, Miss Kinsky, I hate him, so does Luke. We hate him for lying to our father the way he did, and for the way he hurts him all the time.”

Padmé’s insides were churning even thinking about Palpatine this way, and her uneasiness was noted by Leia. The girl felt a kinship to the councilor because of this; but there was something else too. Leia found herself drawn to the woman, felt a connection there that ran deeper than simply their shared hatred for the emperor. After all, if most people were truthful, they would say the same thing. No, there was more to Leia’s fascination than merely Padmé’s courage in being open about her feelings. There was much more, and Leia herself didn’t know what it was.

“What makes you think he does those things?” Padmé said at last, managing to sound calm and professional.

“My father told me,” she said. “At least about the lying. He told me that the emperor had lied to him when my mother died, saying that he killed her. My father believed he’d killed her all these years until he found Luke and me, and then he knew it wasn’t true.”

Padmé didn’t know how to react to hearing this, and said nothing for a moment. She’d wanted Vader to believe she’d died; but had no idea he’d think he himself had been responsible. But in reality, he nearly was, for if Obi-Wan hadn’t shown up, he may very well have killed her right then and there, along with their unborn babies. “I’m sorry,” she said at last.

Leia nodded. “Thanks,” she said. “As for him hurting my dad, he’s never admitted that to me, but I feel certain of it. Whenever he talks to the emperor he’s always so sad afterwards, sad and angry.”

Isn’t that a pity... Padmé thought bitterly, finding it hard to summon up sympathy for Vader. He’d chosen Palpatine over her, over their family ten years ago, after all, despite her pleadings to stay with her.

Padmé was about to say something, when Leia’s stomach growled rather loudly.

“Ooops,” Leia said, her face turning red. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said, with an embarrassed smile. “I haven’t eaten yet.”

Padmé smiled back. “I haven’t either,” she said. “Why don’t we continue our conversation over lunch?”

“Don’t you eat with the other teachers?” Leia asked in amazement.

Padmé shrugged. “You seem far more interesting than any of them,” she commented, making Leia laugh. “Come on; let’s go before my stomach starts growling too.”

Star Destroyer Exactor

Thirty minutes after Vader had left the cell block he’d returned and found that the president and his cabinet were strangely quiet. It seemed as though they’d decided to be uncooperative, despite Vader’s warnings. This made Vader realize that his instincts were dead on about the president. *I’m going to enjoy this*, he thought, relishing the thought of breaking these rebel sympathizers.

“So,” Vader pronounced. ‘Who shall be first?’ He stopped in front of the president. “You perhaps? Or maybe I’ll let you watch while I interrogate each member of your cabinet one by one?”

The president blanched visibly at this, but said nothing.

“Very well,” Vader began, signaling to one of the clones standing guard at the door. ‘I hope you have a strong constitution, Mr. President,’ he said as the clone pointed a blaster at one member of the cabinet. “This isn’t going to be pleasant. Come with me.”

Veslack Academy — Coruscant

“So what is good here?” Padmé asked her daughter as they stood in the queue.

“Not much, actually,” Leia told her with a smile. “Luke usually ends up finishing my lunch for me.”

Padmé laughed. “Will he be joining us?” she asked hopefully.

Leia shrugged. “Maybe,” she said. “He likes to hang out with his friends.”

“Don’t you?” Padmé asked.

Leia looked up at her, trying to find the words she needed to say. “Yes,” she replied at last. “But you seem more interesting than any of them,” she added with a smile.

Padmé was thrilled to hear her daughter say this, and felt as though they had already made a strong connection. *How do I tell you the truth, Leia?* She thought as they found a table. *And will you resent me when you find out I’ve been deceiving you?*

“Here comes my brother now,” Leia said.

Padmé looked up as her son approached, taking in every detail of him. He was smaller than Anakin had been, but the eyes, those startlingly sky blue eyes were identical. And right now they were looking at her with undisguised curiosity.

“Luke, I want you to meet someone,” Leia said when her brother reached their table. “This is Miss Kinsky. Miss Kinsky, my brother, Luke,” Leia said.

“It’s nice to meet you, Luke,” Padmé said, holding out her hand to her son. As Luke shook her hand, Padmé had a flashback to the first and only other time she’d made physical contact with her son, when Obi-Wan had held the tiny boy beside her moments after his birth. She remembered touching Luke’s face as she gave him his name, and now here he was a ten year old boy.

“Same here,” Luke said, still examining her face. He frowned. “I think I’ve seen you before,” he said.

Padmé was startled by this and the smile left her face. “I don’t know how that can be,” she said automatically.

“Have you ever been to Tatooine?” Leia offered.

“Well, yes,” Padmé replied. ‘But it was before you were born,’ she added. “So I don’t think it’s me you saw, Luke.”

Luke wasn’t so convinced, but didn’t say so. “Weird,” he said simply. “Nice meeting you, anyway,” he added.

“Are you going to eat with us?” Leia asked.

“Uh, I kinda promised the guys I’d eat with them,” he said apologetically. “Sorry.”

“It’s alright,” Padmé said. “Friends are important.”

Luke nodded, glad she understood. Even though she was but a stranger to him, he didn’t want to hurt her feelings. “See ya later,” he said, and then left Padmé and Leia alone.

“Luke’s a little shy,” Leia said by way of explanation. “Just at first anyway.”

Padmé nodded. “That’s okay,” she said. “Most boys would rather eat with friends than some strange woman they’d never met.”

Leia smiled. “I guess so,” she said. “Isn’t that strange that he thought he’d seen you before, though,” she commented.

Padmé nodded. “Yes, it is,” she said as she noticed some of Leia’s friends approaching them. ‘Looks like your friends are about to join us,’ she told her daughter. “I suppose we’ll have to continue our conversation later.”

Leia looked up and nodded. “I guess so,” she said. “But please stay,” she added quickly as Padmé started to stand up.

Padmé looked at her daughter. “Are you sure? Your friends might not want a teacher sitting with them.”

“Too bad,” Leia replied. “Besides, you’re not like the other teachers. You’re funny, and cool, and....well, just different!”

Padmé smiled. “In that case, I’d be happy to stay.”

Soon Padmé found herself surrounded by a small group of girls who were all very curious about who she was. After living in relative isolation for so long, Padmé found the attention of the young girls to be almost overwhelming. But she wanted to get to know the children who Leia called friends, and entertained the girls’ questions patiently.

“Mr. Wagar is checking you out, Miss Kinsky,” one of the older girls commented, leaning over to Padmé.

Padmé frowned. “Checking me out?”

“Yeah, he’s right over there,” the girl said, nodding in the direction of the door.

Padmé turned to look, and sure enough here was Len Wagar. He waved at her with a smile when he saw her looking in his direction. “Great,” she said, turning back. “I’ll be right back.”

The girls giggled. “He likes her,” one girl declared. “I saw him watching her earlier too.”

“Well she is very pretty,” another commented. “I just love her hair!”

Leia smiled, pleased that her friends liked Miss Kinsky as much as she did. As she watched her walk over to meet the other teacher, Leia felt a twinge of protectiveness, as though she wanted to keep her new friend from the legendary Mr. Wagar. *I wonder if she’s married*, she thought. For a moment she thought of how cool it would be to introduce Miss Kinsky to her father. *If only he didn’t need that awful suit and mask*, she thought sadly. *He’s so lonely, and she’s so sweet...*

“Hey, there you are!” Len said as Padmé reached him. “What are you doing in here eating with the rug rats?”

“I was having a conversation with Leia,” she replied, ignoring his derogatory comment. “She needed someone to talk to.”

“I’m sure,” he said. “Considering who her father is, but it’s lunch hour, you’re off the clock, Red.”

“Off the clock? Is there such a thing when children are involved?” Padmé countered.

Len shrugged. “Well, it’s your choice of course,” he said, not getting the hint. “I just thought you might prefer some more sophisticated lunch companions,” he added with a smile.

Padmé forced a smile. “I suppose I should get to know my coworkers,” she realized. “Let me just say goodbye to the girls and I’ll join you in the teachers’ lounge.”

“Cool,” Len replied, giving her a double thumbs up.

Padmé rolled her eyes as he walked away, wondering how if she how someone so obtuse could have landed a teaching job in this prestigious institution. She smirked as she thought of how quickly she’d be rid of his unwanted attention if she told him who her husband was. *It would almost be worth the risk*, she mused as she returned to Leia and her friends. *Almost, but not quite.*

Chapter 24

Twenty-Four

Star Destroyer Exactor

Vader watched as a pair of clone troopers carried out the body of the latest victim of his interrogation. So far none of the cabinet members had given forth any information, and Vader was starting to worry that he'd been barking up the wrong tree. He could only imagine the outcry from the Imperial Senate if this proved to be a dead end. Three members of the cabinet were already dead, and no information about the Rebel Alliance's presence on Dantooine had been uncovered. And then there was the emperor....

"Lord Vader, should I bring in another one?" the clone asked once he'd disposed of the body.

"Yes," Vader replied. "He's close to breaking, perhaps this will be the one."

The clone nodded, and left to bring another prisoner to the interrogation room.

Vader had hoped that this ugliness would be behind them by now, for he wanted to contact Coruscant. He missed Luke and Leia more than he'd believed possible, and was anxious to check on them. *It won't take long*, he decided, judging that he had the right to take ten minutes to contact Coruscant. *I'm the commander of this ship, damn it... I can do what I please.*

"I will return in twenty minutes," Vader told the clone who was assisting him. "Keep the prisoner detained here until I return."

"Yes sir."

Coruscant

"It's the weekend, woohoo!" Luke shouted as he ran to the security gate where Han Solo was waiting for them.

Leia laughed at her brother as she walked along with her friends.

"Who's that?" one of the older girls, Jill, asked Leia.

Leia looked over to where Han Solo stood. "Oh, that's Han," she replied. "My father thought we needed a watchdog to keep the media away."

"He's cute," Jill said with a smile. "Really cute."

Leia looked back at Han, not having even considered this. "I guess," she said, not wanting to appear immature.

"Think you can come over this weekend, Leia?" Pati asked her.

"My dad isn't home, so I don't think so," Leia replied.

"Where did he go?" another girl asked.

"I don't know," Leia admitted. "A mission for the emperor is all I know."

The girls were properly impressed by this, knowing that no doubt it was very important.

"Let me know if you can come," Pati said as the girls parted ways.

"I will," Leia replied, knowing the chance of that was zero. "Have a good weekend!"

"So what are we doing this weekend?" Luke asked Han as they flew off towards home.

"Well I'll need to check with your father first," Han told them.

Luke and Leia exchanged a look, knowing if their father made the decision they'd go nowhere.

"Have you heard from him?" Leia asked Han.

"No," Han replied. "But we can try and raise him when we get home."

"I miss him," Luke said, looking out the window. "When is he coming home?"

"Don't know kid," Han replied. "Maybe he'll have a better idea when we talk to him."

Luke nodded, hoping that Han was right.

—

"So how did your first day go?"

Padmé looked up from the report she was working on to see Len standing in the doorway. "It went very well," she said.

"Cool," Len said, walking into the office. "So what plans do you have for the weekend, Red?"

Here it comes, Padmé thought. "Well, I just moved into my apartment," she said. "So unpacking mainly."

"Need some help?" he asked.

Padmé looked up at him. "No, thanks," she said.

"Okay," he said. 'How about dinner then?' he persisted, not giving up for a moment. "You need to eat, after all."

Padmé sighed, feeling very uncomfortable. It wasn't that this young man wasn't unattractive, for he was. But Padmé's heart had died ten years earlier, when the only man she'd ever loved betrayed her and attacked her so viciously. How could she make this man understand that? "Yes, I do," she said. 'Please don't misunderstand me,' she said, deciding to be perfectly frank, "but I'm not the dating type, Len. I've never loved another man since my husband died, and I've never even considered dating anyone since then. Perhaps one day," she added for good measure, "but right now... I'm just not ready."

Len frowned. "It's been ten years, Ania," he said. "Don't you think you've mourned long enough?"

Padmé frowned. “If you can’t respect my feelings then I have nothing more to say to you,” she said, standing up. “I’m leaving now.”

“Hey, Red,” Len said as she walked past him. “Would you wait please?”

Padmé stopped in the doorway, but didn’t look at him.

“I’m sorry, okay?” he said, softening his tone. ‘I didn’t mean to insult you or anything,’ he added. “It’s just that it’s hard to believe a gorgeous woman like you is happy being alone.”

Padmé looked up at him. “Did I say I was happy?” she asked, and then walked away. He watched her go, admiring her shapely figure and the gentle sway of her hips.

“No, you’re not happy,” he said. “But I know how to make you happy, if you’ll just let me try.”

Star Destroyer Exactor

Vader felt himself relax as the images of his children finally appeared on the screen. He smiled under his mask as Luke and Leia each tried to talk to him first, telling him everything that had happened all in one sentence.

“We miss you, Dad,” Leia said when Luke finally stopped to take a breath. “When are you coming home?”

“I don’t know,” Vader told her. ‘Things are not going well at all,’ he added. “I may be longer than I’d originally anticipated.”

Neither of the twins was happy to hear this, and it showed on their faces.

“You’re well, Luke?” Vader asked his son.

“Yeah,” Luke replied. “We don’t go swimming again until next week,” he told his father.

“Be sure to inform the instructor that you don’t know how to swim,” Vader said. “Do you hear me?”

Luke nodded. “Yes,” he replied. “I hear you.”

“School is going well?” he asked.

“Yes,” Leia replied. “We have a new teacher on staff, a new councilor,” she told him.

“Let’s hope he’s more competent than the last one,” Vader remarked.

“She’s not a he,” Luke said. “She’s a she.”

Vader frowned. “What?”

“The new councilor is a woman,” Leia told him. ‘She’s *really* nice,’ she added with a smile. “And so pretty that our gym teacher already has the hots for her.”

“Indeed,” Vader replied, amused by his daughter’s comment. “I had no idea there was so much melodrama going on at Veslack.”

Leia giggled. “Well, it makes things interesting at least.”

“Mr. Wagar doesn’t have the hots for Miss Kinsky,” Luke spoke up. “Does he?”

“Yes, he so does,” Leia replied. “You’re so clueless, Luke.”

Luke turned to his father. “Dad!”

For once Vader was glad he wasn’t there. “Get along,” he said. ‘I need to talk to Lieutenant Solo for a few moments before I go,’ he told them. “I’ll contact you when I can.”

“Bye Dad,” the twins said in unison.

“Goodbye,” he said. “Be good.”

The twins stepped away, and Vader felt the tension return to his body as the image of his precious twins faded from view to be replaced by Han Solo.

“Yes, Lord Vader?” Han said.

“Things are under control?” Vader asked.

“Absolutely, sir,” Han replied at once. “The twins were hoping that we could do something fun this weekend. I told them I’d ask you.”

“Something fun?” Vader asked. “Such as?”

Han shrugged nervously. “I don’t know,” he replied. “Maybe take them to the arcade, or...”

“No,” Vader replied at once. “Out of the question. They are not to leave the house without me being there, Solo. Is that clear?”

“Perfectly sir,” Han replied.

“I’ll be in touch,” Vader said. “Keep me informed.”

“Yes sir,” Han replied as Vader’s image faded from view.

He stood up and summoned the Darkness around him again, preparing to continue with his interrogation, hoping to have more success with the remaining few cabinet ministers than he had with the first few.

Coruscant

Padmé spent the weekend settling into her new home, shopping and getting acclimating to the bustling city life of Coruscant once more. She was relieved to know that Vader was away from the planet. She was fairly confident that he wouldn’t recognize her, but she wasn’t certain if she could face him without a strong emotional reaction that could give her away. The longer he stayed away the better, as far as she was concerned, except for one thing: the twins missed him.

It was with mixed feelings that Padmé had learned that her children were growing close to their father. While she was happy that they were, the jealous side of her wished it wasn’t so. Padmé knew that she faced a monumental challenge in trying to gain custody of her twins; the fact that they were happy where they were made it possibly insurmountable. But she refused to give up, and vowed to find a way to be a mother to her children no matter what.

The weekend was a boring one for the twins, for the restrictions placed upon them by their father, even in absentia, made it drag on. They had finished their homework, spent some time

in the exercise room, and even tormented See Threepio for a good long time before the weekend was even over. However just before bedtime on the second day they were surprised to hear from their father who was calling in to check up on them.

Vader once again listened patiently as the twins gave him a minute by minute run down of their weekend, finding it hard not to laugh when they told him of the way Threepio had managed to get lost inside a closet. He highly suspected that they'd had a hand in the unfortunate droid's misadventure, but didn't say so. He was enjoying their narrative too much to spoil it.

"Any idea when you'll be home?" Leia asked as always.

"No," Vader replied. 'I have almost concluded my business here,' he added, not wishing to tell them how grisly that *business* had been, or how he'd had to torture seven people before the president finally broke down and revealed the names of the Rebels within his government. "So hopefully it won't be much longer."

"Dad can I stay home on day four?" Luke asked.

"Why?" Vader asked.

"That's the day we go swimming," Luke told him.

Vader was silent for a moment, sensing his son's fear even from the great distance between them. "Luke, you have to face your fears if you are ever to conquer them," he told him. "Learning to swim isn't natural for Tatooine natives, but it can be done. I did it, and so can you."

"Were you afraid?" Luke asked him.

Vader nodded. "The first time I saw a waterfall I was terrified," he admitted.

Leia smiled. "Where was that?"

"On Naboo," Vader told her. "Your mother's home world."

Neither of the twins said anything in response, for it was so rare that their father divulged any information about their mother that they were both hoping that he'd tell them more. When it became obvious that he wasn't about to, Luke finally spoke up.

"Maybe I can ask Mr. Wagar for some lessons," he said at last. "I'll be really embarrassed to, though," he added.

"You must get past that, Luke," Vader told him. "Swimming is an important life skill that you must master."

"I can help him, Dad," Leia said. "I'm a strong swimmer."

Vader nodded. "Good idea," he said. "Thank you, Leia."

Leia smiled, pleased at her father's praise.

"You two should be getting to bed now," Vader said, noting the time. "School tomorrow after all."

"Okay," the twins replied, not wanting to say goodbye to him.

“I love you both,” Vader told them. “And hope to see you soon.”

“We love you too, Dad,” Leia said, to which Luke nodded. “Goodnight,” she added, blowing him a kiss.

The simple gesture grabbed at Vader’s heart, and he found his eyes grow wet with tears. He ended the transmission and took a moment to collect himself before standing up.

“Lord Vader, we’re ready,” a clone’s voice was heard over the comm..

“I’m on my way,” Vader said, standing up and steeling himself once more.

Chapter 25

Twenty-Five

Anakin and I lie in sated bliss on the sofa. I know that he needs to leave soon, for he cannot take the risk of Master Yoda checking in on him only to find his room empty. I know he has to leave, but the thought of it still tears me apart.

"I wish I could stay the night," he tells me, kissing the top of my head. "But I can't. I have to get back to the Temple. Master Yoda will be expecting to see me first thing in the morning."

"Master Yoda?" I ask. "Are you not with Obi-Wan again?"

"Obi-Wan is in the hospital," he replies. "That's why I'm here on Coruscant."

I frown upon hearing this, concerned at once. . "Is he all right?"

Ani shakes his head. "No, he's not. He has a serious head injury, some broken bones, and internal injuries. But he'll be fine."

"What happened?"

"We were planting explosives," he replies. "He was a little too close when they went off, and was thrown about 10 meters."

"Poor Obi-Wan," I say softly, relieved that it wasn't my beloved who was injured. "Do you think it would be okay if I visited him in the hospital?"

"I think he would like that very much," he tells me. "And it would give me a chance to see you as well," he adds with a smile.

I smile too. "Yes, I thought of that as well," I admit. "Of course you won't be able to seduce me in your master's hospital room."

Anakin lifts his eyebrows. "Me? Seduce you? I think you have it all backwards, my lady," he tells me. "You are the seductress, using your feminine wiles to have your way with me."

I laugh. "Oh that's it, is it?" I reply. "Here I was thinking it was you who seduced me. What was I thinking?"

Anakin grins. "I can't imagine." He checks his wrist chrono.

"Do you have to go?" I ask him.

He nods. "I'm afraid so, angel," he tells me, kissing my brow. "But I will find a way to come back tomorrow."

I nod, trying hard not to cry. "I hope so," I reply.

"I will," he tells me as he stands up. "No matter what it takes, Padmé."

I nod, my emotions too close to the surface to respond as I watch him dress.

"I will see you tomorrow," he tells me, bending down to kiss me once more. My tears spill out of my eyes, despite my best efforts to keep them at bay. Ani sits down beside me.

"What is it?" he asks.

"I'm sorry," I reply, wiping my tears away impatiently. "I just wish you could spend the night. It's so wonderful to wake up in your arms, Ani."

He pulls me into his arms. I know he feels terrible for leaving, but I can't help but wanting him to. He's my husband, and yet sometimes I feel as though we're merely lovers, meeting secretly simply to fulfill our physical need for one another. I know that isn't true, but when he leaves me mere minutes after making love to me, it hurts.

"I'm sorry," he tells me, kissing the top of my head. "It won't always be this way, Padmé, I promise you. Once I'm knighted, I will have much more freedom."

"Will you?" I ask, looking up at him. He's told me this before, and somehow I have my doubts. I know the Jedi too well to believe it will be that easy.

Anakin nods. "Yes, of course I will. No more master breathing down my neck," he adds, smiling at me, trying to make me laugh.

I smile at last, unable to resist him. "I can't imagine," I reply. "I look forward to that day, Ani."

"It won't be long now," he tells me. "Sooner or later they'll have to knight me. I'm getting too old for this braid."

I laugh and take it in my hands. "I love your braid," I tell him.

"Well when I am knighted, it's yours," he tells me with a smile. "Now I really have to go. Are you okay?"

I nod. "Yes, I'm okay," I reply. "Besides, I'll see you tomorrow, right?"

"Right," he responds. He kisses me once more. 'I love you,' he tells me. "Sweet dreams."

"I love you too, Ani. Until tomorrow."

*Padmé awoke to the sound of the alarm, the images of her dream shattering in the process. She sat up in bed, fighting the emotions that her dream had elicited. *I miss you!* She thought as the tears filled her eyes.*

*The past ten years since losing Anakin had been hell for Padmé, particularly when memories from the past haunted her this way. Her need for him, both emotionally and physically, was just as strong as it had ever been, and memories of their time together only made those needs more acute. *Damn you, Palpatine,* she thought, hating him intensely. *You stole everything from me, but you won't take my children too. Somehow I will stop you, both you and your servant. Somehow Luke and Leia will be mine, and mine alone.**

Pushing away the emotions she'd learned to sublimate for years, Padmé got out of bed and went to get ready for work.

Leia was eager to get to school that morning, for she was hoping that she would get a chance to talk to Miss Kinsky again. Leia didn't understand what it was that she felt when she

was near Miss Kinsky, but she definitely felt something. It was as though the councilor had filled a place in Leia's life that she didn't know was in need of filling. Was it just that fact that Leia had no mother in her life now that she felt drawn to her? Whatever the reason, Leia couldn't wait to see her again.

"How was your weekend?" Pati asked Leia as they took their seats in class.

"Boring," Leia sighed. "My dad still isn't back, and Luke and I were stuck at home all weekend."

"That's a drag," Pati replied. "You should have come over. We watched holovids."

"My dad would flip out if I left the house without his permission," Leia said. "Especially when he's not home."

Pati nodded in understanding, hardly able to imagine what it must be like to have Darth Vader for a father. "Well, maybe when he comes home," she said.

Leia nodded. "Yes, maybe," she agreed.

"Good morning, class," Miss Zadane said as the children quieted down. "I hope everyone had a good weekend. We have a very exciting project we're going to start this morning, a family tree."

The children looked at one another in surprise, excited by their teacher's announcement.

"Now, can anyone explain what a family tree is?" Miss Zadane asked. "Yes, Ryan?"

"It's a list of names of your parents and their parents and their parents, and so on," the boy replied.

"That's right," the teacher replied. "And you can include holos of your family as well," she added.

"Cool!" Pati said, turning to Leia. "Won't this be fun?" she asked.

Leia, however, did not share her friend's enthusiasm. *A family tree?* She looked over at Luke who was looking back at her. She knew he was thinking the same thing as her: *How do I do that when my father won't even talk about my mother?*

"I'll give you some time to get started," Miss Zadane said. "The assignment is due on day three. That will give you plenty of time to talk to your parents and grandparents if necessary."

The children buzzed excitedly as they got started, all but Leia and Luke.

"How are we supposed to do this?" Luke asked his sister as he joined her at her group. "I have no clue about any of our grandparents, do you?"

Leia shook her head. "No, none," she replied. "And the assignment is due in two days."

"Don't you think the teacher would give us more time if she knew Dad was off world?" Luke asked.

"I suppose she would," Leia replied. The problem was Leia didn't want to admit to her teacher that she and Luke knew nothing of their family roots. She was trying very hard to fit

in, and this would make her stand out like a sore thumb. And that was the last thing she wanted.

"Well, I guess we can start with you and me," Luke suggested, "and we know Dad's name."

"And our mother's name," Leia added as she watched Luke write the names down. Once that was done they looked at each other.

"Now what?" Luke asked.

Leia shrugged. "I have no idea," she said.

Luke grinned. "We could always make it up," he said in a quiet voice. "She'd never know the difference."

Leia glanced up at their teacher, who was busily helping someone log onto a computer. "No, Luke!" she said. "That would be cheating!"

Luke rolled his eyes with a sigh, and started doodling on the page. "Well it's better than sitting here doing nothing," he said.

Leia couldn't help but agree.

"How is it going?" Miss Zadane asked as she came over a few minutes later.

"Okay," Luke replied as she looked over their shoulders at their work.

"Luke, why did you write down that name instead of your father's name?" the teacher asked. "Anakin Skywalker was a Jedi who died in the Great Purges."

Luke and Leia looked at one another. "Ooops," Leia said, deleting the name. "Luke was just fooling around," she said.

The teacher wasn't amused. "Somehow I don't think your father would find your joke humorous, Luke," she said, and then walked away.

Luke frowned. "What does she know?" he grumbled. "Anakin Skywalker *is* our father, Leia," he told his twin.

"I know," she replied, watching their teacher. "But I guess Dad doesn't want everyone to know that he used to be Anakin Skywalker," she remarked.

Luke's scowl deepened. "I don't get that," he muttered as he wrote Darth Vader in the spot where Leia had deleted Anakin Skywalker. "What's the big deal? It's who he is, Leia. Darth Vader is just a name."

"Luke, be careful about what you say," Leia warned him quietly. "You never know who might be listening," she added.

Luke suddenly grew fearful and said no more, and continued with his doodling.

Padmé's morning dragged on as she was visited by only a handful of students, some of whom had come to see her yesterday. She was relieved that Len Wagar had not been to see her yet, and was hoping that her stern words before the weekend had finally got through to him.

Morning recess break had just started and Padmé was just about to go and get herself a cup of tea when she was met in the doorway by her daughter.

"Hello, Leia," Padmé said with a smile. "It's so nice to see you again."

Leia smiled, the kindness of the young woman making her feel warm inside. "It's nice to see you too," she replied. "Are you going to the teachers' lounge?"

"Not if you need to talk," Padmé replied. "Come on in."

"Thanks," Leia said. In truth she didn't need to talk, but simply wanted to spend time with the councilor. But she figured Padmé would find that strange, so she came up with a plausible reason for her visit. "Luke and I have to make a family tree," she told her as they sat down.

"Oh?" Padmé said. "That should be fun."

"Well, for most kids I guess it would be," she said. "But for us it's next to impossible."

Padmé frowned. "And why is that?" she asked. "Is it because you've only recently started to live with your father?"

"Well, that's part of it I guess," she replied. "We don't really know much about our family. Actually, we know nothing about it."

Padmé wasn't surprised by this, for the death of his mother had always been a difficult topic for Anakin. "I'm sorry," she said. "Perhaps when your father returns he'll be able to help you. When is the project due?"

"Two days," Leia replied. "And I don't know if Dad will be home by then," she added.

"I'm sure your teacher would give you an extension," Padmé offered. "If you explained to her how your father isn't home right now."

"I'm sure she would," Leia replied. "It's just that... "she hesitated, unsure how much she ought to share." My dad is a widower," she told Padmé. "And he won't talk about our mother."

Padmé held a tight rein on her emotions at this point, not wishing to give her daughter any reason to be suspicious. "No? Not at all?"

"Well, very very little," Leia replied. "But if we ask too many questions he either leaves the room or changes the subject."

"Why do you think that is?" Padmé asked.

"He misses her," Leia said, her dark eyes reflecting the sadness she felt for her father. "He once told me when she died a part of him died," she continued. "And that she was his very soul. I guess it's just too hard for him to talk about her, but Luke and I know so little it's kind of hard for us. I understand he misses her, but I just wish he'd understand how we feel too. She was our mother, after all."

"Yes, she was," Padmé said, unable to hold back the retort. "I'm sorry, Leia; I wish I could help you." *Truly I do...*

Leia shrugged. "It's okay," she said. "Luke says we should just make stuff up," she added with a smile.

Padmé laughed. "That would work," she said. "But if your teacher found out, she might not find it funny."

Leia nodded. "Do you think there would be any information on her on the holonet?" she asked.

"Who?"

"My mother," Leia said. "I know her name was Padmé, and that she was a senator. Is that enough to do a search?"

"I don't think so," Padmé said, hating to crush her daughter's idea, but knowing it was too soon for her to learn the truth. "Perhaps if you explain that this is for school your father will be more forthcoming with information. He must realize how important school is."

"Oh he does," Leia agreed. "Maybe I'll ask him when he contacts us tonight. All he can do is say nothing," she added.

Padmé nodded. "Yes, that's true," she said. Just then the bell rang, signaling the return to classes. "You'd better get back to your class," she said. "Let me know how things work out."

"I will," Leia said, standing up. "Thanks Miss Kinsky."

Padmé smiled and watched as her daughter left. Once Leia had gone, she turned in her chair so that her back was to the door, so that no one passing by could see the tears that had started to roll down her face.

Star Destroyer Exactor

The *Exactor* finally left orbit around Dantooine. Vader had set up an interim government to replace the one that he'd laid waste to, half having been killed and the other half his prisoners. The information that they'd finally gleaned from the remaining members of the cabinet had proved very useful. Vader's troops had made hundreds of arrests, and had sent a very clear message to the populace that treachery and rebellion would not be tolerated. The emperor would be pleased; at least Vader hoped so.

As the *Exactor* prepared for its jump to hyperspace on its way to rendezvous with the Death Star, Vader could not shake a sense of uneasiness. If the emperor wanted him physically present, it usually wasn't a good thing. And while Vader was not unaccustomed to the emperor's sadistic side, the thought of being separated from the twins any longer was of great concern to him.

It had already been four days since he'd left Coruscant, and in that time he'd only managed to speak to his children twice. He knew that they were being well cared for, well guarded and well protected; but that didn't mean he didn't miss them. He did miss them, terribly. Until their separation he hadn't realized just how much a part of him they'd become in the short time they'd been living with him; so much so that the thought of losing them now was terrifying to him. Was that why the emperor had summoned him? Had he changed his mind and decided that Luke and Leia were to be taken away? *No, no he can't do that; he can't take them from me! I won't let him, I'll kill him first*, Vader vowed darkly. Somehow the focus

of his life had shifted irrevocably over the past few weeks, now that he was a father. Before he knew of the existence of the twins, duty had been everything; his very reason for existing was to serve his master. But now, everything had changed. Luke and Leia had given his life meaning once more, and their wellbeing was now his sole reason for existing. Where the Dark Side fit into all this he wasn't even sure. All he knew was that without a doubt that he would do anything, *anything* to protect them, no matter what.

"Lord Vader, we've just made the jump into hyperspace," Lieutenant Ozzel informed Vader via holocommunicaiton.

"Good," Vader said. "Inform the emperor of our ETA."

"Yes sir," Ozzel replied. "At once, my lord."

Chapter 26

Twenty-Six

"Thank you, Dormé. That will be all."

Dormé bows and then leaves us alone to finish our dinner. It is our last evening together, and the atmosphere is one of sadness and apprehension.

"That was delicious," I say, hating the pregnant silence that hangs over us.

Padmé nods. "Yes, Dormé is an excellent cook. I've tried to learn from her, but I'm afraid I'm not quite as talented as she is."

I smile. "Nonsense," I say. "I love your cooking."

Padmé looks up at me and laughs. "Liar," she teases.

I laugh, not able to fool her for a minute. "Well you're better than Obi-Wan, at least."

"Thanks... I think," she replies. "I guess he's expecting you tomorrow, isn't he?"

I nod in response, not wishing to dwell on our impending separation.

"And you don't know when you'll be back again?" she asks.

"No, there's no way of knowing," I tell her. "And even if I knew, there's no way I could let you know in advance anyway."

"I know," she replies, pushing her dessert around on her plate. "I wish there was some way that you could write to me... it would make it a little easier I think."

I smile at her. "Well you know, I do write to you whenever I get the chance, Padmé."

She frowns in confusion. "You do?? What do you mean?"

"I've been keeping a journal," I explain. "And every chance I get, I write to you in it. I know you won't get to read it, at least not right away; but it makes me feel closer to you somehow."

Padmé smiles. "That's so sweet," she says, reaching over and putting her hand on mine. "What do you write?"

I shrug. "Just about what happened on that day, or maybe how I'm feeling. Sometimes I write about what I'd like to be doing to you," I add with a grin.

Her face reddens a bit at this disclosure. "Do you really?" she asks softly.

I nod. "Yes I do," I tell her.

"How naughty," she says with a gleam in her eyes. "What sort of things do you write?"

I smile, knowing that I have piqued her interest. "Do you want me to read it to you?"

"You have it here?" she asks.

"Of course," I say, standing up. "If Obi-Wan ever found it I'd be in serious poodoo," I tell her.

She giggles as I leave the room and head to the bedroom. Rummaging around in my haversack, I find the datapad that contains my innermost thoughts over the past 6 weeks.

"I had no idea you were a writer, Ani," Padmé tells me as I settle onto the couch beside her.

I shrug. "I'm not really; this is just the ramblings of my brain mostly. Kind of a scary thought, isn't it?" I ask with a smile.

Padmé laughs. "The inner most thoughts of a Jedi padawan," she muses. "Sounds like some rather interesting reading."

"In parts, maybe," I concur as I activate the device and commence flipping through the entries. I stop as I find one that I think just might capture her interest.

"I wrote this one just last week," I tell her, handing the datapad to her.

Padmé accepts it and starts reading. It doesn't take long before the color starts to rise in her face. She looks up at me briefly, and I can tell that she is becoming excited by what I have written.

"Read it aloud," I tell her.

She lifts her eyebrows the suggestion. "I don't know," she says doubtfully.

"Haven't got the nerve?" I challenge her with a grin.

She narrows her eyes at me. That always gets her.

"Of course I do," she retorts.

"Then go ahead," I say, putting my arms back behind my head and getting comfortable.

She looks at me, and then back down at the datapad and then back up at me again.

"Go ahead," I repeat.

"I don't know what you want me to read," she says, stalling for time.

"The part that made your cheeks turn pink," I tease.

She puts one hand on her cheek. "You are terrible to tease me so," she says, trying not to smile.

I laugh. "But it's such fun," I tell her. 'And you're so adorable when you blush,' I add, leaning toward her and kissing her. I take the datapad from her. "Here, let me read it," I say.

I sit back as I scan over the words on the screen. Wow... no wonder she didn't want to read this...

"Well, go ahead," She says, leaning back against the couch in the very manner I had just done.

I look up at her and laugh. "Well, you already know what it says," I reason.

"Oh my, the mighty Anakin Skywalker has lost his nerve, has he?" she teases.

"Of course not," I reply. "I just don't want to...embarrass you."

She leans forward and looks at me intently. "Try me," she challenges.

"Okay, you asked for it," I say. I return my attention to the datapad in my hand and scan down the page. Oh boy...

"Here goes," I say, clearing my throat dramatically....

"Oh my," she says a little while later. She looks at me, her breath still coming fast. "That was incredible," she says with a smile.

I smile back at her. "I'm glad you enjoyed it."

Her eyes start to glisten, as hard as I know she is trying to prevent it.

"You're crying," I say, stating the obvious. "Padmé, what is it?"

"I'm sorry," she says, sitting up and wiping at her tears impatiently. 'I'm so sorry to ruin this beautiful moment, Ani,' she says. "I just can't stop thinking that this is our last night together for who knows how long," she cries. "Months maybe! I know it has to be this way, but it's so hard to be apart from you, Anakin... it's breaking my heart!"

I sit up beside her and pull her into my arms. "I know, I know," I say softly, kissing her hair. "I hate this as much as you do, Padmé. The war can't go on forever though; one day we will be together like we dreamed. I promise."

She looks up at me, her face wet with tears. "Take me to bed, Anakin," she says softly. "Take me to bed and make love to me."

I smile and place a soft kiss on her beautiful mouth. I stand up and hold my hand out to her. She puts her hand in mine and I pull her to her feet. I lift her into my arms, like I've seen the heroes in old holovids do, and carry her up to our bedroom, my mouth claiming hers as her hands find their way into my hair once again. If this is to be our last night together, I am determined to make it one neither of us will ever forget.

Vader awoke amidst the onslaught of memories, the images of his beloved wife still tormenting him. He pressed his hands to his unmasked eyes, wishing he could purge his mind of all memory of her, of their time together. It was torture to constantly be reminded of her this way, to relive moments of passion that they'd shared, moments of absolute happiness. *But she's gone now; you threw what you had with her away when you chose that monster you serve.*

Vader lowered his mask, determined to crush the emotions his dreams had elicited with work. He had almost left his quarters when his comm. signaled. From the calls signal, he saw that the message was coming from Coruscant. Activating the screen, he was pleased to see his children.

"Hi Dad," Luke and Leia said, giving their father an eager, enthusiastic smile.

Uh oh, he thought. What do they want? "Hello," he said. "Is everything all right?"

“Oh yeah, great,” Luke replied. “We just wanted to say hi.”

“Is that so?” Vader asked.

The twins nodded enthusiastically. “Yes, of course,” Leia affirmed. “We miss you!”

“And I miss you too,” Vader replied. “And I know you both well enough to know that you want something,” he added.

Luke and Leia looked at one another uneasily, dismayed that their father could see through them so easily.

“Well, there is something we need you to do for us, now that you mention it,” Luke said.

Vader nodded. “Yes, so I suspected,” he said. “What is it?”

“We need some information,” Leia said.

“About our family,” Luke put in.

Vader said nothing for a moment. “What about it?” he asked suspiciously.

“We need the names of your parents and our mother’s parents,” Luke said.

“For a family tree,” Leia added.

“What the devil is a family tree?” Vader asked.

Leia explained patiently while her father listened.

“And why do you feel compelled to make a... family tree?” he asked.

“It’s for school,” Luke told him. “We have to make one. Our teacher’s making us.”

Vader was dismayed to hear this, and sensed that his children were being truthful with him. “The names of your grandparents are not something I wish to divulge over a holocommunication,” he told them. “I will give you the information you need when I return.”

Luke and Leia looked at one another nervously.

“The project is due tomorrow, Dad,” Leia told him. “We can’t wait until you come home.”

“It’s due tomorrow and you’re asking me just now?” he asked in annoyance.

The twins nodded in unison, making him shake his head in amazement.

“Your teacher will have to give you an extension,” he told them. “Do you wish me to convey this to her personally?”

Luke and Leia looked at one another again, as though conferring silently.

“No, I think we can handle it,” Luke said finally. “She’s pretty nice.”

“And Miss Kinsky said she’d talk to her too if we needed her to,” Leia put in.

“Miss Kinsky? I thought your teacher’s name was Zadane?” Vader asked.

“She is,” Leia said. “Miss Kinsky is the new councilor. I told you about her yesterday. She’s really nice. I talked to her about the project, and how...” Leia stopped as she realized

her father probably wouldn't be happy if he knew the particulars of her conversation with Miss Kinsky.

"How?" Vader asked, sensing his daughter was hiding something. "What did you talk to her about, Leia? And why are you talking to her at all?" he demanded.

"I just told her that we don't know very much about our background because we only recently came to live with you," Leia said diplomatically.

"I see," Vader replied, not convinced she was being totally truthful with him. "And why does she need to know that?"

"She doesn't," Leia replied. "I just like to talk to her. She's nice, and friendly, and always willing to listen to me when I need someone to talk to."

Jealousy and insecurity filled Vader upon hearing this. Who was this woman that she had managed to gain Leia's trust in a matter of days? And why was it that she was so friendly to Leia? Surely there was an ulterior motive at play here, he reflected darkly. "Do not be so quick to trust strangers, young one," he told his daughter. "You must keep your guard raised at all times, Leia. As my child there will be many who will try to gain your trust and learn your secrets. Do not trust any of them, including this Miss Kinsky."

Leia was about to protest, but thought better of it. "Yes Dad," she said instead, lowering her eyes.

"I will be home soon," he told them. "I'm on my way to see the emperor now."

"Good," Luke said. 'Han Solo is boring, Dad,' he complained. "We didn't do anything fun all weekend!"

Vader smiled under his mask. "That is indeed regrettable," he said. 'Perhaps I can make up for his inadequacies when I come home,' he added. The smiles on his twins' faces upon hearing this gave Vader a feeling of warmth inside that he was unaccustomed to. "I must go," he said. "Be good," he added, as usual.

"Bye Dad," the twins said. "Love you!"

"I love you too," he replied. "And I'll see you soon."

The transmission ended, and Vader stood up. They had reached the Death Star, and the emperor was waiting for him. Bracing himself for his audience with his master, Vader left his quarters, his mental shields firmly in place.

Coruscant

Padmé sat in her office, glancing at her wrist chrono every so often. The lunch hour was nearly over, and Leia had not come to see her yet. Padmé had come to look forward to lunch hours, for each day since she'd started Leia had come to see her during that time. But today she had not. And while Padmé had come to realize that Luke was far shyer than his twin and not as likely to seek her out, Padmé was surprised by Leia's absence. She'd even checked the attendance on the school wide network to see if Leia was at school that day, and she was. *So where is she?*

"Hey there, Red!"

Padmé looked over at the door to see her nemesis standing there.

“Hi,” she replied.

“What’s up?” he asked. “You look upset.”

“No, I’m fine,” she said.

Len nodded his head, although he didn’t completely believe her. “Hey, you busy next period?” he asked. “I’ve got the level fours for swimming, and I need a female teacher to supervise the girls in the change room.”

Level fours, Padmé thought, that’s Luke and Leia’s class... not swimming, poor Luke!

“Doesn’t their own teacher normally do that?” she asked, trying to hide her eagerness.

“Yeah, but she’s got a meeting with a parent,” he explained. “So I’m kinda stuck.”

“I can help you out,” she told him, standing up. “I’m not busy right now.”

Len smiled. “Cool,” he said. “Don’t suppose you brought a bathing suit,” he asked with a smile.

Padmé had a feeling that he only asked so that he could check her out in her swimsuit, and that gave her a distinct shudder. “No,” she replied. “I don’t normally bring one to work.”

Len laughed, not realizing she’d been totally creeped out by his question. “No worries,” he said. ‘I’m going to tell Lucia that you can take her class,’ he told her. “I’ll meet you at the pool,” he said. “Catch you later, Red,” he said, shooting an imaginary thumb and finger gun at her.

Padmé rolled her eyes, and stood up to head over to the level four class, excited at the prospect of spending some time with her children.

Luke had been dreading this day since the weekend, and now it was upon him. He hadn’t worked up the nerve to ask his physical education instructor for swimming lessons, for Mr. Wagar didn’t seem the type who would understand Luke’s fear of water. But now it was day four, and day four meant swimming, ready or not.

Leia could sense her brother’s nervousness as they and their friends gathered their gear. “Luke, just don’t go in the deep end,” she told her brother. “It will be okay.”

Luke frowned. “He’s going to try to get me to swim,” he replied. “I just know it.”

“Well, you need to learn sometime,” Leia countered. “He is the teacher after all.”

“I don’t want everybody watching,” Luke grumbled. “It’s embarrassing.”

Leia sighed, wishing she had a solution to her brother’s problem.

As they formed a queue at the door, Miss Zadane announced that she needed to attend a meeting and that the school councilor would be taking them to the pool.

“Miss Kinsky is taking us?” Leia asked her teacher.

“That’s right,” Miss Zadane replied. “And here she is now,” she added, seeing Padmé approaching.

Leia looked over to see Padmé approaching, and smiled, realizing that she'd missed her. And then she remembered her father's warning about trusting her. *But he doesn't know her*, she thought. *She's completely trustworthy, I know it, I can feel it.* Suddenly Leia felt guilty for having stayed away from the kind woman for the past two days. After the kindness Miss Kinsky had shown her, was that any way to repay her?

"Hi Miss Kinsky!" Leia said with a smile as Padmé reached the door.

Padmé gave her a smile. "Hello Leia," she said. "It's nice to see you."

She saw Luke standing behind Leia and gave him a smile too. "Hi Luke," she said.

"Hi," Luke said shyly.

Padmé could see how uneasy her son was about the prospect of swimming, and her heart went out to him. She only hoped that Len Wagar had the sensitivity to deal with Luke's fears in a positive manner. *I'll make sure he does*, she thought, looking back at Luke as the class followed her to the recreation section of the school. *Perhaps a reminder of who Luke's father is would do the trick*, she mused.

The girls in Leia's class were very excited about swimming, and it didn't take them long to get changed. Padmé stood at the door as the girls filed out, all outfitted in the latest in swimwear fashion that Coruscant had to offer.

"Are you swimming with us?"

Padmé turned to Leia, who had waited to be the last to exit the change room.

"No, I don't have my swimsuit here today," Padmé told her. "If I'd known I was going to be coming here with your class, I would have brought it."

"Do you like to swim?" Leia asked.

Padmé nodded. "Yes I do," she replied. "Very much."

Leia smiled, thrilled that this woman she admired so much shared one of her passions. "So do I," Leia replied. "It's one of my favorite things to do."

Padmé smiled. "Perhaps you can help convince Luke about how fun it is," she suggested. "I get the feeling he's going to need some coaxing."

Leia nodded. "He's scared of the water," she told Padmé as they walked to the pool deck. "I guess growing up on Tatooine he didn't see much of it. Alderaan has lots of lakes and rivers," she put in.

"So does Naboo," Padmé replied.

Leia looked at her quickly. "Naboo?? Is that where you're from?"

Uh oh, Padmé thought, cursing herself for her openness. "Yes," she replied. "It is."

Leia smiled. "My mother was from Naboo," she said. "What's it like?"

Padmé was about to reply when she saw Len coming towards them, and judging by the look on his face, he was not a happy man.

“Good thing you’re here Red... uh I mean Miss Kinsky,” he said. “Luke won’t leave the change room.”

Padmé frowned. “Did you talk to him?”

“Only to tell him to get his butt out here,” Wagar replied. “He’s refusing to listen.”

Padmé looked down at Leia, who was scowling at the teacher, no doubt feeling the same level of animosity that she herself felt. “I’ll go talk to him,” she said.

“I’ll come with you,” Leia offered.

“No, you go on and have your swim,” Padmé replied. “I can deal with this.”

Leia nodded, and watched her go back to the change room area, hoping that Miss Kinsky’s magic would help her brother just as it had helped her.

Chapter 27

My dear readers— this is the last post until the middle of July

My dear readers— sorry for the uncharacteristically long delay between chapters. I just returned from vacation in Scotland. Enjoy :)

Twenty-seven

Luke was sitting on one of the benches that ran along the perimeter of the change room, his knees drawn up to his chest when Padmé found him. He looked up at her, and then looked away, embarrassed.

“Hi Luke,” she said.

“Hi,” Luke mumbled in response.

Padmé wasn’t put off by Luke’s attitude and sat down beside him. “Mr. Wagar tells me you don’t want to go out to the pool,” she said.

“That’s right,” Luke said. “And nothing you can say will make me either.”

Padmé smiled. “What makes you think I’m here to talk you into going out to the pool?”

Luke looked at her, trying to guess her game. “Why else would you be in here?” he asked. “I know Mr. Wagar sent you in here to get me out.”

“You’re a smart boy, Luke,” Padmé replied. “That’s exactly what he did.”

Luke smiled triumphantly.

“But that doesn’t mean I’m going to do it,” Padmé continued. “He’s not my boss, you know.”

Luke smiled more. “He’s kind of a duffus,” he said conspiratorially.

Padmé lifted her eyebrows, surprised by her son’s comment. “Is that what you think?”

Luke nodded. “Everybody does,” he said.

“Well, be that as it may,” Padmé replied, doing her best not to smile, “we have a problem here, Luke. You can see that, can’t you?”

“Yeah,” Luke replied, lowering his eyes. “I’m not trying to be a pain, really. It’s just that...” he stopped, unsure how much he ought to say. He barely knew this woman, after all. And yet, his sister trusted her implicitly, and Luke trusted his sister.

“It’s just that you’re afraid of water,” Padmé said, completing his sentence. “Aren’t you?”

Luke looked up at her and nodded the fear clear in his big blue eyes. Padmé’s heart wrenched painfully at the sight of it.

“You want to know what I think?” she asked.

“What?” Luke asked.

“I think that so long as you’re afraid of water, swimming will never come easily to you,” she told him.

“Yeah, I know,” Luke replied. “My dad says that I have to conquer my fears, and that swimming is an important life skill.”

“Your father is right,” Padmé said, choking on the irony. “It’s never easy to face our fears, but if we let them control us, that only makes them stronger.”

Luke nodded. “Are you afraid of anything, Miss Kinsky?”

Padmé smiled. “Of course,” she said. “Everyone is afraid of something.”

“I don’t think my father’s afraid of anything,” he replied.

“Don’t be so sure, Luke,” Padmé replied. “I’m sure if you asked him he’d disagree with you.”

Luke shrugged. “Maybe,” he replied. ‘So what am I going to do?’ he asked. “How do I... conquer my fear?”

“By taking it slowly,” Padmé replied. “Jumping into the swimming pool in the deep end is probably not the best approach,” she added with a smile.

Luke’s face reddened. “Yeah, I feel really dumb about that,” he told her.

Padmé put a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t feel dumb, Luke,” she said. “You’re trying to fit in; it’s understandable you’d want to. But just because your life experience is different than most boys your age, doesn’t mean you have to change to be like them.”

Luke frowned. “What do you mean?”

Padmé smiled, the love she felt for her son filling her heart. “I mean that fitting in isn’t always what it’s cracked up to be,” she told him. ‘Sometimes being unique is far more rewarding. You’re a special young man, Luke,’ she said. “Don’t forget that.”

Luke nodded, and began to smile. He could see why Leia was so fond of this woman, for there was a warmth and kindness to her that made Luke feel totally at ease. He felt a connection with her that surprised him in its strength, and he wondered how that was possible after such a short acquaintance.

“I have an idea,” Padmé continued. “Do you want to hear it?”

Luke nodded.

“I would be happy to give you swimming lessons, Luke,” she said. “Private ones, so you wouldn’t feel pressured or embarrassed in front of your friends. We can go as slowly as you need to, and I guarantee in a few weeks you’ll be swimming just as well as your sister. What do you say?”

Luke thought about her proposal for a moment, and then nodded. “I say it sounds like a great idea,” he said. ‘Thanks Miss Kinsky,’ he said with a smile. “Leia was right, you are very nice.”

Padmé smiled. "So are you, Luke," she replied as she stood up.

"What are you going to tell Mr. Wagar?" Luke asked.

"I'm going to tell him he needs to back off, first of all," Padmé told him. "And then I'm going to tell him your father has asked me to give you private lessons. I think if I mention your father Mr. Wagar will back off in a hurry, don't you?"

Luke grinned. "He'd probably pee in his pants," he said.

Padmé laughed, even though she knew she shouldn't. "Yes, I think he just might," she said.

"Thanks again, Miss Kinsky," Luke called after her as they left the room together. "You're the best!"

Death Star

"Welcome to the Death Star, Lord Vader," Tarkin said, giving Vader a slight bow.

"Tarkin," Vader replied. "Where is the emperor?" he asked without preamble. He'd always hated Tarkin, and had no desire to exchange small talk with him.

"In his quarters," Tarkin replied. "He's expecting you. Shall I take you to him?"

"There is no need," Vader replied. "I can find him quite easily," he bragged, walking away from Tarkin. Vader smiled under his mask as he sensed the little man's annoyance and jealousy, and then stepped into a nearby lift.

As he rode up the level where he knew he'd find the emperor, Vader raised his mental barriers. He sensed that the emperor had commanded him here in order to grill him about the twins. Tension rippled through his body as he thought of how he must protect Luke and Leia, at the thought of Palpatine learning of how strong they actually were. *He must never know, Vader vowed; not until it is too late.*

Upon reaching the emperor's quarters, Vader waited outside until he was summoned. He knew how much his master loved playing mind games with him; Palpatine knew he was there, and yet he made him stand there waiting just to make sure Vader knew who was the boss. Finally, after a few minutes, he was summoned inside.

"Ah, Lord Vader," the aged emperor greeted his servant. "It is good to see you."

"My master," Vader simply replied, bowing to him. "The situation on Dantooine has been settled."

Palpatine nodded. "Yes, so I've heard," he said, a hint of displeasure in his voice. "I understand that it took you days to get the names from the president, and only after killing half of the cabinet!"

Vader was silent for a moment, wondering how had betrayed him this way, making a mental note to kill them for doing so. "Yes, that is true," he admitted. "It seemed, however that the cabinet members who were killed were among those named as rebels, my master, so their death served two purposes."

“Did you ever stop to think that the president may have lied about their involvement?” Palpatine insisted. “That he used their death as a way of feeding you false information?”

“It is not possible for anyone to do that,” Vader stated with confidence. “I know when someone is lying to me, my master. The Force tells me.”

Palpatine sat back in his chair and regarded his servant. There was no doubt that the presence of his children in his life had changed Vader. This concerned Palpatine, for he sensed that his apprentice had begun to question things that once he simply accepted on faith. And that was not a good thing. Somehow he needed to rein Vader in, beat him back into submission. And he had the perfect way to do it.

“So you say,” Palpatine replied. ‘It won’t surprise you then to know that I too know when I am being lied to, Lord Vader,’ he continued in a voice laced with anger. “And I highly suspect that you have lied to me about the twins the Naboo whore bore you.”

Vader’s body tensed at the emperor’s denigration of Padmé. It seemed he never missed an opportunity to do so, and Vader suspected he took pleasure in watching him struggle to keep his composure. “I have not lied,” he replied at last. “In fact, I have been very forthcoming about them.”

“Have you?” Palpatine challenged. “I highly doubt that the offspring of Anakin Skywalker are without any Force abilities whatsoever, and yet you insist that they are.”

Vader did not reply, for he had no idea what to say.

“There is a way to prove your ridiculous claim, however,” Palpatine continued, enjoying Vader’s uneasy silence. “I want them tested. Both of them. I want to know their medichloridan count, Vader. That is the only proof I will accept that you are telling me the truth.”

His worst fears realized, Vader said nothing for a moment, but knew that every moment of silence would only add to the emperor’s suspicions. “As you wish,” he said at last. “I will have them tested upon my return to Coruscant.”

“Yes, do that,” Palpatine replied. ‘I will send one of my aides with you,’ he added. “Just so that you don’t have to come back all this way to deliver the results.”

“Of course,” Vader replied, knowing very well why Palpatine was sending one of his cronies with him. He didn’t trust Vader to be honest about the results, and wanted to ensure that he was being watched.

“You are dismissed,” Palpatine said with a wave of his hand. “Return home to your loving family, Lord Vader,” he added sarcastically.

Vader said nothing but bowed perfunctorily and then left the hateful presence. His hands were clenched into fists as he made his way down the corridor. *He made me come all this way and dismisses me after five minutes?* He thought angrily. No doubt the trip itself had been a test of Vader’s loyalty, one which he’d passed. But the blood tests of his twins... that was another matter.

As he arrived at his shuttle, Vader was met by a smarmy looking man who he assumed was the emperor’s aide. He said nothing to the man, who introduced himself as Vansic Jokar, and

simply boarded the shuttle, eager to be on his way off the Death Star and heading back home to his children.

As they flew back to the *Exactor*, Vader stared at the man, doing his best to unnerve him. He was doing a good job, for the man squirmed visibly under Vader's expressionless stare. *Enjoy the trip, toadie, he thought darkly, for you won't live long after it's over.*

Coruscant

Len Wagar was waiting outside the change room when Padmé emerged with Luke. He stood with his hands on his hips, ready to blast Luke for his disobedience.

"So, you ready to follow directions now?" he asked Luke.

Luke looked up at Padmé, who took a protective step closer to her son.

"We need to talk, Mr. Wagar," she said. She looked down at Luke. "Why don't you go sit on the bench and watch the other children swim?" she suggested.

Luke looked briefly at Wagar, and then back at Padmé. "Okay," he said and then ran off, staying very far from the pool's edge as he did so.

Wagar frowned and then turned to Padmé once Luke was out of earshot. "What the hell was that?" he demanded.

"Luke isn't ready to join the class," she told him, following her son with her eyes.

"Why not?" Wagar asked.

Padmé looked up at him in exasperation. "Why do you think?" she asked. "He was nearly drowned a few days ago. The boy is traumatized!"

Wagar shook his head, looking over at Luke. "Bullshit," he said quietly. "It's just because he's Vader's kid that you're giving him special treatment."

Padmé frowned, growing angrier by the minute. *You insensitive ass*, she thought irately. "You believe what you want," she said at last. "But somehow I doubt that any parent would understand if you blatantly ignored their child's needs."

Wagar looked at her, surprised by her challenging stance. "The kid needs to grow up, Ania," he said. "He can't hide behind his dad every time something is hard for him."

"Is that what you think he's doing?" Padmé countered. 'Luke told me that his father has encouraged him to learn to swim,' she told him, surprising herself by her defense of Luke's father. "In fact, he has agreed to let me give Luke private swimming lessons."

Wagar's eyes widened upon hearing this. "You're going to teach him how to swim? *You?*"

Padmé nodded. "I am an excellent swimmer," she told him. "And certainly more in tune with the boy than you are," she added.

Wagar put his hands up in a defensive stance. "Whoa, Red, chill," he said, only adding to Padmé's aggravation. "You want to deal with Vader and his kid, be my guest. Just don't piss him off or you may end up disappearing if you know what I mean."

Padmé frowned. "Don't you have a class to teach, Mr. Wagar?" she asked coldly.

Wagar nodded and then walked off, blowing his whistle as he did so. Padmé looked over to where Luke sat, looking much happier now that things had been settled and his fears had been allayed. He waved when he saw Padmé looking his way, and gave her a smile. Padmé returned his smile and waved back, her son's sense of wellbeing filling her heart with warmth. *I've missed you so much*, she thought, looking over Leia next. *We have so much to make up for, the three of us. And no one, not even Darth Vader, is going to stop us.*

Star Destroyer Exactor

This does present a problem, Vader reflected grimly as two clones carried the body of Vansic Jokar out of the shuttle. The stress of the past week had worn heavily on Vader. So when Jokar had made a rather foolish comment about the mother of Vader's children, he quickly found himself with a large gloved hand around his neck. And while it had felt good to crush the life from the oily little man, Vader was now left with a dilemma. The man's death was bound to only increase the emperor's suspicions, particularly if he learned the manner of his death. *Unless he doesn't find out*, Vader thought as he made his way to the bridge. *Unless I can buy some time.*

"Lord Vader, the bridge is asking for orders," Lieutenant Piett told him, appearing at Vader's side.

Vader thought for a moment. "Coruscant," he said, deciding that he needed to see his children. "Tell them to set a course for Coruscant. We're going home."

Chapter 28

Twenty-eight

Coruscant — Veslack Academy

“It’s cold!” Luke exclaimed as he lowered himself slowly into the pool’s shallow end.

Padmé smiled, her son reminding her more and more of his father. “It’s not that cold, Luke,” she told him.

“Once you get used to it you’ll even think it’s warm,” Leia added as she floated easily on her back nearby.

Luke frowned. “I doubt it,” he muttered. He looked up at Padmé, determined not to let her down. ‘Okay,’ he said. “I’m in. Now what?”

“We’re going to start by getting you more comfortable in the water,” Padmé said. ‘I want you just to walk around in this shallow end. It doesn’t get any deeper than your chest until that point there,’ she said, pointing to a marker on the side of the pool. “Just walk around, get a feel for the water, and once you’re comfortable, we’ll go a little further.”

Luke looked at her, panic in his eyes. “Further into the pool?” he asked anxiously.

Padmé smiled. “No, further along in your orientation,” she said, putting a hand on his shoulder. ‘We’re not going to do anything you’re not ready for, Luke,’ she assured him. “I promise.”

Over the next two hours Luke grew gradually more and more accustomed to the strangeness of being immersed in water. He had almost mastered treading water when Han Solo appeared on the pool deck, and Padmé realized that their time was reaching an end.

“You’ve done very well today, Luke,” Padmé told him. “You accomplished a lot in a short time. You ought to be proud.”

Luke smiled. “Thanks to you,” he said. ‘Thanks again for doing this, Miss Kinsky,’ he said. “Mr. Wagar is a good teacher and all, but you’re the best!”

Her son’s words of praise all but undid Padmé, and she simply smiled at him as Luke made his way back to the ladder and climbed out of the pool. Leia joined him there after a few moments.

“Hi Han!” Luke said, giving him a smile. “Did you see me? I was treading water!”

Han smiled. “That’s great, kid,” he said.

“Do you like swimming, Han?” Leia asked.

“Well,” he said, his eyes moving over to Padmé as she emerged from the water. “If my swimming instructor had looked like yours, I might like it a whole lot more than I do,” he remarked.

Padmé looked at him and lifted an eyebrow. “Aren’t you a bit young for that sort of talk?” she asked.

Han smiled. “I’m twenty years old,” he told her. “Too young?”

Padmé nodded. “Way too young,” she said.

The twins had no idea what had just transpired between the two adults in their midst, and simply went to the change rooms to get dressed.

Star Destroyer Exactor

“What do you mean they’re not home yet?” Vader demanded. “School ended more than two hours ago!”

“Sir, Luke began swimming lesson,” Captain Kassel replied. “They’re after school.”

Vader was annoyed that he knew nothing of this. “When did this start?”

“Just today,” Kassel said. “The boy is very excited about them, actually.”

Vader nodded. “Good,” he said. ‘Well let them know when they get home that I’m on my way back to Coruscant,’ he said. “I should arrive in approximately twenty-four hours.”

“They’ll be very pleased to hear it, sir,” Kassel replied. “I know they’ve missed you very much.”

Not as much as I’ve missed them, Vader reflected. “Tell Solo I’ll pick them up at school,” he said. “If I’m delayed, I’ll contact you beforehand.”

“Yes sir,” Kassel replied. “See you tomorrow.”

Vader nodded, and then ended the transmission.

Coruscant

Luke and Leia talked Han’s ear off all the way home about Luke’s swimming lesson and how wonderful Miss Kinsky was.

“What did you mean if your swimming teacher looked like Miss Kinsky you’d like swimming more?” Luke asked.

Han looked at the boy nervously, hoping he hadn’t heard him. “Uh, well, it’s just that she’s very pretty, that’s all.”

Luke thought about this about for a moment. “Yeah, so?”

Leia giggled at the expression on Han’s face at Luke’s question.

“Ask your dad when he gets home, kid,” Han said at last. “That’s his department, not mine.”

“I wonder when he’s coming home,” Leia sighed. “I miss him.”

“Me too,” Luke said.

Han hadn’t known Darth Vader very long, but the Dark Lord’s reputation was certainly well known. The fact that Vader had children was unbelievable enough, but that his children

loved him and missed him in his absence was even more astonishing. Han had wondered about the mother of the twins, who she was, what had happened to her. Of course, such questions would no doubt cost Han his job, his life or both should he ever be foolhardy enough to ask them.

"I don't know when he's expecting to return," Han told them as he made his final approach. "I'm sure he's anxious to get home, though."

As soon as the twins entered their home, Captain Kassel told them of the conversation he'd had with their father earlier.

"So he'll be home tomorrow?" Luke asked hopefully.

Kassel nodded. "Barring anything unforeseen," he replied. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. 'Funny thing, Luke,' he continued, "Your dad didn't know about your swimming lessons. Didn't you tell me he'd authorized Miss Kinsky to give you lessons?"

Luke nodded. "Yeah, that's what she told Mr. Wagar," he replied.

Kassel and Han exchanged a look of concern.

"What's wrong?" Leia asked. "Why are you looking at each other that way?"

Kassel had once again forgotten how intuitive Leia was and hesitated for a moment. "Well, your father knew nothing about this arrangement, Leia," he explained. "So in essence she lied when she told Mr. Wagar that he'd authorized her to give Luke lessons."

Leia frowned. "Miss Kinsky would *never* lie!" she declared vehemently. "She's kind and sweet and wonderful!"

"People aren't always what they seem, Leia," Han pointed out. "I think we need to let your dad know about this," he said.

Kassel nodded. "I agree," he replied. "It seems there's more to this Miss Kinsky than we know."

Luke and Leia looked at one another, perturbed by this statement. Both of them trusted Miss Kinsky completely; the thought that she was capable of deception seemed impossible to them. Somehow they knew that if she had lied, it had been for a good reason.

"Come on you two," Kassel continued, standing up. "Time to get your homework done. Dinner will be ready soon."

Luke and Leia went to their rooms without question, both of them anxious to be alone to discuss this new development. As soon as they'd reached the pair of desks in their joint study, Leia spoke up.

"Luke, I've been thinking about something," she said. "And you might think I'm crazy, but hear me out."

"Okay," Luke said, deciding not to tell his sister that he often found her crazy.

"I think there's a reason why Miss Kinsky has taken an interest in both of us," Leia continued. "And why we're so drawn to her."

“Why?” Luke asked, having no idea where she was going.

“I think she’s a relative of ours,” Leia said. ‘Of our mother’s,’ she added. “Maybe she heard about us living with Dad on the holonet and wanted to come and see us for herself,” she continued. “Maybe... maybe she never knew our mother had had children, and...”

“How would she know our mother was Darth Vader’s wife?” Luke interjected.

Leia stopped, her thought process derailed, but only for a moment. “Well... maybe our mother told her about her marriage,” she suggested. “And maybe she knows that Darth Vader was once Anakin Skywalker, and...”

“And you *are* crazy,” Luke decided. ‘Think of it, Leia,’ he stated, “think of the chances of that really happening. It’s nuts!”

Leia frowned, hating to admit that her brother was probably right. Their parents’ marriage had been a secret from everyone, even their families. No one knew about it, and certainly no one knew that Darth Vader and Anakin Skywalker were one and the same man.

“Besides,” Luke continued. “If she were a relative of ours, wouldn’t she have just come out and told us by now? Why would she keep that a secret? It just doesn’t make sense, Leia.”

“But why do we feel so close to her then?” Leia asked, disappointed and confused. ‘I know you feel it too,’ she added, “don’t you?”

Luke nodded. “Yeah, I do,” he said. He thought for a moment. ‘I guess it’s at least possible,’ he conceded. “I mean, I do feel something around her, almost as though there’s something... I don’t know, something...”

“Familiar?” Leia offered.

Luke nodded. “Yeah, that’s it,” he said. “Familiar. She reminds me of the woman I used to dream about sometimes.”

“Have you dreamed of her lately?” Leia asked.

“No,” Luke replied. “Not since we started living with Dad.”

Leia sighed, the mystery only adding to her confusion. “There’s got to be a connection, Luke,” she stated. “When Dad comes home we’ll ask him about Mother’s family. Maybe she had a sister.”

“Maybe,” Luke agreed. “But do you really think he’d be willing to talk about her if she did?”

Leia smiled. “We have a project to do on our family, remember?” she said. “He’ll have no choice but to talk about it.”

Luke grinned. “You know, sometimes you do come up with a pretty good idea,” he teased.

Leia’s only reply was a punch in Luke’s arm.

Chapter 29

Twenty-nine

School seemed to drag on for Padmé the next day, for the highlight of her day had become the time she spent with the twins after school. Seeing Luke and Leia in the corridors in passing was simply not enough any more, and Padmé knew that very soon she would need to tell them the truth. How could she explain to them why she had kept such an important truth from them? *They'll understand when I tell them what happened*, she reasoned, *when I tell them how I've spent the past ten years*. What would happen once the truth was out, Padmé could not even imagine. How will Darth Vader react to learn his wife was actually alive? How would the twins react? *They are already close to him, how can I compete with that?* She wondered anxiously. In her mind exclusive custody of the twins was the only option for her, for Darth Vader was, in her mind, a monster that she wanted nothing to do with. *But how do I get custody of them when he has the courts in his control? How do I fight him when I have no leverage whatsoever?*

"What's up, Red?"

Padmé's thoughts were interrupted by Len Wagar who slid into the seat across from her in the teacher lounge. Lunch hour had just begun, and the small lounge was quickly filling up with staff members.

"Not much," Padmé said. "You?"

"I'm hungry enough to eat my own arm," Wagar said as he started in on his lunch.

Padmé couldn't help but smile. It seems males were the same no matter their age or their planet of origin. Her observation brought back a wave of unwanted memories, memories of happier times, of a time when it seemed that the future was bright and full of promise...

We have swum to the small island and are lying on the warm sand, my head resting on Anakin's flat abdomen. He is slowly stroking my back, and we are both utterly relaxed and at peace, simply enjoying the warm sunshine and one another's company. And then I hear something that makes me frown, until I realize what it is. I smile and look up at him. "Ani, was that your stomach?"

"Maybe," he replies, a little embarrassed.

I laugh. "No maybes about it! I heard it! It was like the growl of a wild animal!"

This makes him burst out laughing. "Stop teasing me," he protests half heartedly.

"There it goes again!" I laugh, hearing it again. "Anakin, is there ever a time when you're not hungry?"

"No, there isn't," he tells me with a grin. "Just being around you makes me very hungry."

*I laugh and get up. "Oh, is **that** it," reply. "Come on, let's go back and get some lunch."*

“Oh all right,” he replies, standing up. “Just when we finally got dried off...”

“Well here,” I say, splashing an armful of water at him. “That should get you ready for the water.” I turn away and run into the water. Ani laughs as he takes off after me.

Padmé pushed the memory from her mind, thoughts of her beloved Anakin more than she could handle. She focused on her lunch as the teachers all around her engaged in conversations ranging in topic from the state of the economy to what they had made for dinner the previous evening. Padmé did her best to join in whenever she was in the lounge, not wanting to be considered a snob. Usually there was at least one conversation that she could contribute to, and as she continued to listen, she soon realized there was one that she had very much to contribute to, but didn't dare.

“I just don't understand it,” one teacher was saying, “how that man could have fathered those two beautiful children.”

“I know what you mean,” another agreed, “Luke and Leia Vader are both such great kids. It's hard to believe he's their father.”

“Maybe he's not,” another offered. “I mean, how could he have fathered children in that suit he wears? I heard he never takes it off.”

“Well maybe he has a special trap door that allows him to...function,” another offered. His suggestion was met with laughter.

“Maybe he wasn't always like he is now,” Padmé spoke up, unable to listen to another cruel comment.

The teachers turned to her, surprised by her comment.

“What do you know about him, Ania?” one teacher asked.

Padmé shrugged. “Only what the twins have told me,” she lied calmly.

“What did they tell you?” Wagar asked.

“I can't tell what they told me in confidence,” Padmé said, “but I know that he had an accident. No doubt that is why he must wear that suit.”

“Makes sense,” one teacher nodded. ‘I wonder who their mother is,’ she added. “Can you imagine being with him? I mean, even without the suit I can't imagine any woman in her right mind wanting to be with him.”

Padmé had to fight back her comment, and simply returned her attention to her lunch, tuning out the remainder of the insensitive conversation.

Later that same day

“Welcome home, Lord Vader!” Threepio exclaimed happily as Vader strode through the corridor towards the lift. “It's so good to have you home! The twins have been most unhappy in your absence, sir, but I can assure you that I have made sure that they ate their vegetables, brushed their teeth and did their...”

The door to the lift closed before Threepio could finish his sentence. He, however, was growing quite accustomed to Vader's less than friendly manner, and simply continued on his

way.

"Kassel," Vader snapped as he entered his office. The captain looked up from the report he was preparing.

"Yes sir?" he asked. "I was just preparing your agenda for the rest of the week."

"Never mind that," Vader said. "I have a...situation that requires some rather fast thinking."

Kassel lifted his eyebrows. "Sir?" he asked, his curiosity piqued.

"A man is dead who shouldn't be," Vader said. "A man who the emperor sent here to spy on me. I need an explanation for the man's death. I'm leaving it up to you to think of one and to communicate with the emperor's office."

Kassel hated this sort of assignment, for this certainly wasn't the first of its kind he'd been given while under the employ of the Dark Lord. Vader's temper was legendary, and he'd left a few dead bodies in his wake over the past few years.

"I'll take care of it sir," Kassel replied finally. "Are you going to pick up the twins?"

"Yes," Vader replied. "How long does Luke's swimming lesson last?"

"Uh, about that sir," Kassel said, rubbing his chin nervously. "There's something I think you need to know."

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"Very good, Luke!" Padmé said, pleased with her son's efforts. "You've really got the hang of it."

Luke smiled as he continued to tread water. Padmé had managed to get him to put his face in the water, and was well on her way to getting him to completely submerge. Luke was feeling far more confident in the water than he had even twenty four hours earlier, and had begun to actually enjoy himself.

"Dad will be so surprised when he comes home," Leia said as she watched from the water's edge.

Padmé looked up at her, Leia's comment suddenly making her feel anxious. "When do you expect him home?" she asked.

"Soon," Leia said, lazily kicking her feet in the water. "Today I think."

Padmé nodded, doing her best to hide her uneasiness. "Well I hope he's as pleased with Luke's progress as I am."

"He will be," Luke said. "He wanted me to learn how to swim. I'm sure he'll want to meet you to thank you in person."

"Oh, he doesn't need to do that," Padmé replied, a surge of fear rushing through her. Both Luke and Leia felt it and frowned.

"You don't need to be afraid of him, Miss Kinsky," Leia assured her. 'I know pretty much everyone is, but he's not scary, honest.'

“Besides, he’ll be grateful for helping me learn to get over being scared of water,” Luke added. “I know he will.”

Padmé nodded, not wanting to tell her children how the thought of meeting their father terrified her.

“Time to go,” Padmé said as she moved to the water’s edge. “Han will be here at any moment to pick you up.”

Luke followed his mother to the water’s edge and climbed out as Padmé picked up a towel. She had just dried off her wet hair and wrapped a towel around it when the sound of footsteps was heard approaching the pool deck. Many footsteps. Padmé frowned and looked over at Leia, who was also looking towards the source of the sound.

“It’s him!” she cried excitedly, standing up quickly. “It’s Dad!”

“Your father is here?” Padmé cried in a panic.

Leia nodded. “Looks like he’s not alone,” she added, stopping as several armed storm troopers entered the pool deck.

“What’s going on?” Luke cried.

“We’re here under orders, sir,” the first clone said.

“What orders?” Leia demanded.

“Orders from your father,” the clone replied, looking for his shoulder. “We’re here to arrest this woman,” he added, pointing his blaster at Padmé.

“Why?” Leia cried. “She’s done nothing!” she declared angrily as two clones flanked Padmé, pointing their blasters at her.

“She most certainly has,” an ominous, familiar voice announced, echoing in the large pool area. Luke and Leia turned to see their father appear. They both ran to him, half elated to see him, half furious that he was doing this.

“Dad! You don’t understand!” Leia cried. “Miss Kinsky was helping Luke! She’s our friend!”

“A friend who lied,” Vader replied. “Who dared to presume that she had my permission to detain you after school in this way.”

“Dad, she’s helping me!” Luke told him. “You can’t do this to her!”

Vader only half heard his children, for he had turned his focus to the woman on the other side of the pool deck. She was being taken into custody and seemed to be doing her best not to face him. This angered him, and Vader walked over to her purposefully. But his way was barred by Luke and Leia, who placed themselves between their father and their mother.

“Dad, please calm down,” Leia said, reaching out and taking one of his hands. “Please call off your troops and listen to us.”

Padmé’s fear for herself had riveted her to the floor; but seeing Luke and Leia step in shook her out of her state. “Luke, Leia, it’s okay,” she said, putting a hand on a shoulder of

each of them. This only angered Vader more, and it was all he could do not to push the twins aside in an attempt to get to her.

“Take your hands off of them!” Vader roared, using the Force to move the twins aside. “How dare you manipulate my children this way!”

Padmé had been frozen with fear from the moment Vader had entered the pool deck, the sound of his malevolent voice making her blood run cold. But his accusation gave her the courage to speak up.

“I’m not manipulating them!” she countered, looking up at him, willing herself not to lose her nerve. To her surprise, Vader said nothing in response, and simply stood staring at her. He had fallen silent, the face he saw staring up at him so indignantly bearing an impossible resemblance to the One he’d long believed dead. “Who are you?” he demanded, his tone less angry.

“I think you know,” she said finally.

Vader shook his head. “No,” he said, backing away from her. “You are an imposter, you have to be!”

“No, I’m not an imposter,” Padmé replied, putting it all on the line. “And you know it as well as me.”

Chapter 30

Thirty

Luke and Leia were confused, their father's change in demeanor surprising them, the feelings he felt emanating from him even more so. What was more; they sensed equally strong feelings from Miss Kinsky, not the least of which was fear.

"Dad?" Luke said at last. "What is it? What's going on?"

Vader was in too much of a state of shock to reply, for what his mind was telling him was beyond his ability to believe. When he said nothing, Leia looked up at her mother. "Miss Kinsky?" she said.

Padmé looked down at her daughter, knowing that her children needed answers. This certainly wasn't the way she had intended to tell them, but the moment of truth had suddenly been thrust upon her.

"Luke, Leia, there's something I need to tell you both," she said.

The twins looked up at her expectantly.

"I haven't been completely truthful with you," Padmé told them. 'For good reasons, important reasons, I've kept my true identity a secret. But not any more,' she said. "Luke, Leia, my real name is Padmé Naberrie Skywalker," she told them. "I'm your mother."

Luke and Leia were too stunned for a moment to respond, and simply stared at her. Leia was the first to speak.

"But....our father told us you were dead," she said. "You can't be our mother, you can't be!"

"She's telling the truth," Vader said, finally finding his voice again. Padmé looked up at him, as did the twins.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Luke asked, looking back at his mother. "Why did you lie to us?"

Padmé felt her eyes fill with tears, hating the look in her son's eyes. "Oh Luke," she said, reaching over and touching his face. 'It's very complicated,' she told him. "Believe me, I hated to do it, but the circumstances being what they are, I felt that I had no choice."

"You mean because of who our father is," Leia said.

Padmé nodded.

"But he's your husband!" Leia cried. "Why would you be afraid?"

Padmé looked up at Vader, wondering how much he had told them, wondering if they were prepared to hear the ugly truth of what he'd done to her on Mustafar, what he'd done to them all when he chose to follow Palpatine. "He was, once," she said, keeping her eyes on Vader.

“But he hasn’t been in a long time. My husband was Anakin Skywalker, and he died ten years ago on the day you two were born.”

“Miss Kinsky? Is there a problem here?”

Padmé and Vader looked over to see Administrator Jeslow hurrying towards them. He had been alerted by the presence of storm troopers on the property, and was anxious to diffuse any problems.

“No, there isn’t,” Vader spoke up. “My wife and I are simply...”

“Your *wife*?” Jeslow interrupted. “Miss Kinsky here is your wife??”

“Yes she is,” Vader replied. “And the mother of my twins. She has not exactly been forthcoming with her true identity,” he added, looking back at her.

Jeslow didn’t know what to say, for he was utterly shocked that the beautiful Ania Kinsky was actually the wife of Darth Vader. “Well....then...” he stammered. “I’ll... so long as there’s no problem here...”

“There isn’t,” Vader assured him. “So go.”

Jeslow gave Padmé one last look and then left, more than eager to be out of Vader’s presence.

“Time to go,” Vader said once Jeslow had departed. ‘This is hardly the place for this conversation. Go and get changed,’ he told the twins. “We’ll discuss this at home.”

Reluctantly Luke and Leia obeyed their father, and ran to the change rooms as Vader dismissed the storm troopers. Within moments he and Padmé were alone.

“I can’t believe this,” he said, walking towards her. ‘You’re alive! You’re really alive!’ he said, lifting his hands to her face. Padmé stepped back, preventing him from touching her. Vader stopped, sensing the tremendous animosity she was feeling, and dropped his hands. “Where have you been?” he asked, at a loss to know what else to say.

“I’ve been in an abbey on Naboo,” she told him. “I’ve spent the past ten years believing that the twins died at birth.”

Vader was horrified to hear this. “What?” He asked. “Who told you this?”

“Obi-Wan Kenobi,” she told him. “He was there when Luke and Leia were born,” she added, knowing that this would annoy Vader no end. She was right. Clenching his fists tightly in anger, Vader did his best not to take out his ire on her.

“He lied to you,” Vader said at last. “Just as Palpatine lied to me.”

Padmé cocked an eyebrow. “Why doesn’t that surprise me?” she asked bitterly.

Vader sensed the depth of her acrimony, and it stymied him. “I... I don’t know what to say,” he said finally. ‘I was told you died at my hand on Mustafar,’ he said. “I only learned the truth recently when I found the twins.”

Padmé nodded. “You very nearly did kill me on Mustafar,” she said. “That was the reason I believed the twins had died, from oxygen deprivation. I only learned the truth when Sola

saw them with you on the holonet.”

“Seems we were both mislead,” he commented. “But now that the truth is out, now that we are all together...”

“What?” she interrupted. ‘You think that we can all be a happy family?’ she asked bitterly. “Is that what you think?”

“Clearly you don’t believe that can happen,” he remarked.

“You’re not the man I married,” she stated bluntly. “You’re not the man I love. I want the twins; you have no right to them. You lost all right to them when you tried to kill them on Mustafar.”

Vader had no reply for her angry comment, but was prevented from even attempting one by the arrival of the twins. The last thing he wanted was to air their differences before them. And yet, it seemed that Padmé was far from amicable towards the idea of them living as a family. *I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised after what I did to her*, he reflected bitterly.

“Are you coming home with us?” Leia asked her mother. “I mean, you should, right?”

Padmé looked down at her daughter, not having the heart to tell her that that was the last thing she wanted. And yet, the thought that Vader would leave the planet with the twins and keep them from her forever made her realize that she’d have no choice but to comply, at least for now. “I... I don’t know, Leia,” she said. “We haven’t worked things out yet,” she added, looking up at Vader.

“I suggest we all go home and discuss this,” Vader said, not wanting to let her leave. “There is a lot we need to talk about.”

“Yes, there is,” Padmé agreed. “Let me get changed, and I’ll join you shortly.”

Vader nodded, and then watched her as she left them and headed for the change room.

“Why is she so angry?” Luke asked his father.

Vader looked down at his son; the boy’s question a loaded one. “It is a...complicated situation, Luke,” he said at last.

“You know, I had such a strong feeling about her,” Leia told her father. “Right from the moment we met. It’s like somehow I knew who she was.”

“The Force is strong in you, Leia,” Vader told her. “It’s not surprising that you were able to see through her disguise, just as I was.”

“Are you happy to see her, Dad?” Luke asked. “You don’t seem happy to me.”

Once again his son’s innocent question left Vader at a loss for words. Happy? He had found his Angel, the woman he loved more than life itself. Of course he was happy. But she wasn’t, and she hated him. That was abundantly clear, and it left Vader wondering which was worse, thinking her dead or living with her acrimony?

“I am happy, Luke,” Vader said at last. ‘I suppose I’m in a state of shock right now,’ he added. “I never dreamed in a thousand years that I’d find her again.”

Leia smiled, the love her father felt for her mother radiating clearly from him. "You really love her," she stated simply.

Vader nodded. "That has never changed," he said, looking towards the change room where Padmé had appeared once more. 'However, things are not so simple, young one,' he added. "Your mother is angry, and with good reason."

"But she loves you," Leia stated. "I know she does, deep down inside. She must."

Vader sighed. *I hope you're right, Leia*, he thought as Padmé reached them. He noticed immediately that she had removed the green contact lenses from her eyes, and was looking up at him with the beautiful brown eyes that he remembered, the eyes that had always managed to melt his heart. They still did. "Ready?" he asked simply.

Padmé nodded. "Yes," she said. "I'm ready."

As they walked along, Leia fell in step beside her mother, looking up at her adoringly. Padmé looked down at her and smiled.

"You know," Leia said, slipping her hand into her mother's, "I had a feeling about you from the moment we met."

"You did?" Padmé asked in surprise.

Leia nodded. "I'm so happy you turned out to be my mother," she said, her dark eyes shining with tears.

Padmé was unable to hold back her own tears at this point and pulled Leia into a tight embrace. "I wanted to tell you so badly," she told her daughter. "It's been tearing me apart having to keep the truth from you both."

Luke, who had been walking with his father, turned back when he realized Leia and Padmé were not behind them any longer. He ran to join them, not wanting to miss out on this pivotal moment, and was soon in his mother's embrace.

Vader watched as his children embraced their mother, the three of them all crying tears of joy at their reunion. Luke and Leia already loved her, he reflected. They had loved her even before they knew who she was, the connection between them undeniable and powerful. It unnerved Vader, for it made him worry that given the choice Luke and Leia would chose to be with their mother rather than him. The thought of losing his precious twins now filled him with cold fear. *It won't happen*, he vowed silently. *I won't lose any of them, ever again. Padmé will have no choice but to stay with us, I'll see to that*, he decided.

Padmé fixed her gaze outside the speeder as Vader directed the craft towards his home. The sound of his mechanical breathing was unnerving, for while she had seen his image before today, being in his presence was something else altogether. How could this nightmare in black have ever been her beloved Anakin? Was there any part of him left under all that black armor and leather?

"You cut your hair."

Padmé turned to him when he spoke. "Yes I did."

Vader was silent for a moment. "Why?"

Padmé lifted an eyebrow. “Does it matter why?”

Silence. “No, I don’t suppose so,” he replied at last. “I just... your hair was beautiful.”

His comment created a lump in her throat, and she turned away from him again.

Luke and Leia sat in the back of the speeder, growing more and more uneasy by the friction that they sensed between their parents. They didn’t understand why the reunion between them was so rife with tension; they loved one another, after all, didn’t they?

“Where do you live, Miss... I mean Mother?” Leia asked.

Padmé smiled, loving the sound of being called that after so long. “On the other side of the city,” she said. “In an apartment.”

“You’re gonna live with us now though, right?” Luke asked.

Padmé said nothing, but looked briefly at Vader, waiting for him to respond. “I don’t know yet, Luke,” she said. “That is something your father and I need to talk about.”

“There’s nothing to discuss,” Vader said. He’d decided that he’d taken all he could of his wife’s animosity. He wasn’t about to allow her to hurt him and further, or even to let her know that her coldness was immensely painful to him. It was time to let her know where things stood. “If you want to be a part of the twins’ lives, you will live with them.”

Padmé turned to him quickly, his words raising her anger once more. “Is that a threat?” she asked.

“No,” he replied simply. “Simply a statement of fact. Luke and Leia are in my care, and have been for many weeks. I am not about to allow you to uproot them now.”

Padmé said nothing in response, her worst fears coming true. She had three choices, the way she saw things: one, remain on the periphery of the lives of her children, only seeing them when Vader said so. This was unacceptable to Padmé, for she needed Luke and Leia, and they needed her. The second choice was to fight him for custody, which, she realized bitterly, was a hopeless cause. The third choice was to live in the same house as the twins, to see them every day, to be a real mother to them; but this entailed living under the same roof as their father, the man she’d decided she’d hate for the rest of her life. But her love for her children superseded her hatred for their father; so, the way she saw it, she had no choice. For now she would have to let him have his way, all the while planning a way to affect changes to her situation.

Chapter 31

Thirty-one

The home of Vader surprised Padmé in its size and to the extent which he had made renovations for the twins. It seemed a strange mix of stark efficiency, which was no doubt what the home had looked like before the arrival of the twins, and hominess that seemed somewhat out of place in the residence of a Dark Lord. Here and there Padmé saw evidence of the presence of children; a jacket, a pair of shoes, a data disc, a hair clip; it seemed that Luke and Leia were very much at home here. And while this made her happy, for it meant that they were happy, it also made her anxious. If they were happy here with their father, what chance did she have of luring them away?

"Come and see my room," Leia urged, grabbing her mother's hand. "It's so cool!"

"Mine's way cooler," Luke declared as he followed along, making sure his mother got the full tour of his room as well.

Vader watched as the twins directed their mother to the suite of rooms that they called their own. And then he signaled Captain Kassel to meet him in his office.

"Yes milord?"

Vader had just sat down at his desk when the captain appeared. "I need you to make some arrangements," Vader told him. "We have a guest."

"Yes of course," Kassel said, dying of curiosity. "May I ask who the guest is? I mean... what sort of arrangements should I..."

"She is the mother of my children," Vader said. "My wife. She will be living here with us from now on. I need you to arrange for suitable living quarters for her, and to have her things brought here."

To his credit, Kassel did a good job of hiding his shock. "Of course, sir," he said. "Where should I send the men to? Do you have an address?"

Vader nodded as he accessed his computer. "I will in a moment," he told him.

Kassel waited, all the while anxious to see the woman who had been the love of Vader's life.

"And this is where we do our homework," Leia said as the twins concluded their tour. "Sometimes we watch holovids in here too, but Dad doesn't like us to do that too much."

"He says most of them are garbage," Luke put in. "And they'll rot our brains."

Padmé tried not to smile at this. "Well he's probably right," she replied. "Speaking of homework, did you two finish that project that you had to do on your family tree?"

"No," Leia replied. "We had to wait for Dad to come home because we don't know anything about our family."

Padmé nodded. “Of course,” she said. ‘Well, I can help you with it if you like,’ she offered. “I know quite a bit about your family,” she added with a smile.

Luke and Leia both smiled in response. “That would be great!” Luke declared.

“Master Luke, Miss Leia, it’s time for dinner,” Threepio announced as he entered the room.

“Threepio!” Padmé exclaimed, seeing her long time companion. “It’s good to see you!”

The droid turned to Padmé. “Excuse me m’am,” he said. “But I’m afraid I don’t know you.”

Padmé frowned. “You don’t?” she asked in disappointment. “It’s me, it’s Padmé!”

“Forgive me, Miss Padmé,” Threepio replied, “but I’ve had my memory erased more times than I can recall. It’s likely that my memory of you has been erased.”

Padmé nodded. “Yes, that seems likely,” she admitted. “Is Artoo with you?”

“Yeah he’s here,” Luke replied. “You know him too?”

“Yes,” Padmé replied. “He was my droid when I was queen of Naboo.”

“You were a queen?” Leia asked in amazement. “Really?”

Padmé smiled. “Yes I was,” she told her children. ‘I was elected queen when I was fourteen,’ she added. “And served two terms until I stepped down and became Naboo’s senator.”

“You were fourteen when you met Dad,” Leia stated. “He told us that.”

“Yes that’s true,” Padmé confirmed.

“So you were a queen when you met him?” Luke asked.

Padmé nodded. “Yes, though I was in disguise,” she explained. “He didn’t know I was a queen.”

“Where did you meet? How did it happen?” Leia asked, wanting to ask her mother a thousand questions all at once.

“We met on Tatooine,” Padmé said. She went on to explain the circumstances of how they had been forced to land on the desert planet, and how she had met their father in the shop where he worked.

“Dad says he loved you from the moment he met you,” Leia said.

Padmé didn’t know how to reply to this. It wasn’t that she doubted this, it was just that thinking of the past, of the love that she’d once shared with Anakin was too painful to consider. “Yes, we had a special bond from the moment we met,” she said at last.

“What happened?” Luke asked. “I mean, if you two loved each other so much, how come you’re so angry with him now? How come you’ve been away for so long?”

Padmé knew that the question was coming, and yet she wasn’t sure what to tell her children. They clearly loved their father very much; how could she destroy that bond by

telling them of the atrocities he'd committed in the past? "I went into hiding shortly after you were born, Luke," she said at last. "You see, when you and Leia were born I had a lot of difficulty, and the doctors had to sedate me. When I woke up I was told that you and Leia had died. I've spent the past ten years believing you were dead. It was only recently that I learned the truth, and that's why I came to Coruscant. To find you."

Luke and Leia were shocked by this disclosure, and didn't know what to say in response. It seemed that lies permeated every facet of their family dynamic, and that confused them tremendously.

"So, you thought we'd died," Luke said trying to make sense of it all. 'And Dad thought you'd died, along with us,' he added. "And we thought both you and Dad had died. Why were we all lied to so much?"

Padmé sighed. "It's all very complicated, Luke," she said. 'And I will explain it all to you both, I promise,' she added. "But for now why don't we just go and enjoy dinner together? We have plenty of time to get all that sorted out."

"Good idea," Leia said. "I'm hungry. Aren't you, Luke?"

"Yep," Luke said, standing up. "Aren't I always?"

Leia and Padmé laughed. "Luke is *always* hungry," Leia told her mother as they walked out of the room. "It's kind of a running joke with us."

Padmé smiled. "Sounds like your father," she commented. "I remember him being like that too."

"Will you tell us about him?" Leia asked. "And you? We don't know anything about either of you, really."

"All we know is that Dad's real name is Anakin Skywalker," Luke put in.

Padmé nodded. "Yes, that's true," she agreed. "But he doesn't use that name now," she added.

"No, he doesn't even like to hear it," Leia said. "I don't really understand why, though."

"He has his reasons," Padmé replied, "and perhaps in time he'll share them with you." They entered the dining room, where three places had been set up. Clearly Vader had informed his subordinates of his wife's presence.

"Good evening, Lady Vader," the serving droid said in greeting as Padmé took a seat. She looked up at it quickly.

"I am *not* lady Vader," she said vehemently. "Is that clear? My name is Padmé Skywalker, do you hear me?"

The droid was a little confused by the human's vehemence, and said nothing in response for a moment. "As you wish, Lady Skywalker," it said as it proceeded to serve dinner. Vader had entered the room just in time to hear the last part of the conversation. And while it didn't surprise him, it did create a rather uncomfortable situation.

"Hi Dad!" Luke said, pleased to see his father. "Are you gonna sit with us for dinner?"

"If that is acceptable," he said, looking at Padmé.

"This is your home," Padmé replied. "You do what you wish."

Vader took a seat, not wishing to get into a row with his wife in front of their children, but starting to grow tired of her pugilistic attitude.

"It is your home now as well," he said. "I have men bringing over your belongings right now."

Padmé's eyes widened in shock. "What?" she cried. "You didn't ask me if that was what I wanted!"

"Your children live here," Vader pointed out. "I assumed you'd want to live here as well. Am I wrong?" he asked calmly. Luke and Leia looked up at their mother expectantly.

Padmé resented Vader for putting her on the spot the way he had. "Of course I want to live with Luke and Leia," she said finally, looking at the twins.

"It's settled then," Vader replied, pleased that he'd managed to maneuver her into a corner. "I'll have quarters ready for you by nightfall."

Padmé said nothing in response, for she was quietly seething. Instead she picked up her knife and fork and started in on her dinner. The twins did the same, and soon they were all eating, a tension filled silence having fallen on all of them.

Night had fallen and Luke and Leia were getting ready for bed when Padmé entered their room. She and Vader had been doing their best to avoid one another, the tension between them almost unbearable.

"So no school tomorrow," Padmé said as she sat on the end of Leia's bed, while Luke sat on the floor. "What shall we do?"

"I'd love to go shopping," Leia said. "Can we?"

"I don't see why not," Padmé said. "I'd like to go to a salon and get this color taken out of my hair," she said, running a hand over her hair.

"You mean that's not your real color?" Leia asked.

Padmé shook her head. "Not even close," she said with a smile.

"What color is it?" Luke asked.

Padmé reached over and picked up one of Leia's long braids. "This color," she said. "The very same shade."

Leia smiled, pleased to hear it. "And our eyes are the same color too," she pointed out.

"That's right," Padmé said. She looked at Luke. "And your eyes are the very same as your father's, Luke," she told him.

"Are they?" Luke asked with a smile.

Padmé nodded. "Yes, you look a lot like he did when I met him, actually. He was very blond then too."

“So did you love him when you first met him?” Leia asked. “The way he loved you at first?”

“Well, I suppose in a way I did,” Padmé replied. ‘I knew that there was something very special about him,’ she added. “He was unlike anyone I’d ever met.”

Leia sighed, finding the whole story very romantic. “You really love him, don’t you?” she asked.

Padmé looked down at her daughter, not knowing how to respond. “I... I loved your father very much,” she said. “More than life itself,” she added quietly.

“He’s there, Mother,” Luke said. “The man you knew, the man you love. He’s inside of him, I know it.”

Padmé smiled, not wanting to quash her son’s beliefs. “Time for bed,” she said, “it’s getting late.”

Luke stood up and walked over to her and gave her a hug. “Goodnight,” he said. “Mom.”

Padmé smiled. “Goodnight Luke,” she said, giving him a kiss on the cheek. “Sweet dreams.”

“Goodnight Mom,” Leia said as Padmé turned to her. “I’m so happy you’re in our lives,” she added.

Padmé smiled and bent down to kiss her. “I am too,” she said, kissing Leia on the forehead. “Sweet dreams, Leia.”

Padmé left the twins’ room, suddenly anxious when she realized she didn’t know where she was going to spend the night. She didn’t want to have to ask Vader, for it was hard to talk to him without things getting nasty. *Is this what my life is going to be from now on?* She wondered anxiously, *living in constant friction?*

Turning around a corner, she nearly ran into Vader, whose approach she had not heard.

“Luke and Leia are in bed?” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied. “I just tucked them in.”

Vader nodded. “I’m sure they enjoyed that,” he commented.

“I think so,” she replied. An awkward silence ensued for a moment before she spoke again. “So where am I sleeping?” she asked.

“Your quarters aren’t quite finished yet,” he replied. “However, there is a bed in there.”

“You know I could have stayed at my own place,” she countered.

“Yes, I suppose you could have,” he agreed. “But with all your things here, that hardly seems logical.”

Padmé frowned, holding back from reminding him that moving her things had not been her idea. Vader could sense how uneasy she was, but was at a loss to know what to say. “I want you to feel at home here, Padmé,” he told her. “And will do what it takes to make sure that you do.”

Padmé nodded, uneasy with his declaration.

“I’ll show you to your room,” he said, wanting to say so much to her, but knowing that it was too soon, and she was still too angry. “Come with me.”

Padmé walked beside Vader in silence as he led her down a corridor to a room not far from his own quarters. She stepped inside where a small team of workmen were working furiously to make renovations.

“You’re dismissed for the night,” Vader told them. “Leave us.”

The workmen did so at once, picking up their tools with them.

“I apologize for the state of the room,” he said, looking around. ‘If I had known you’d be here... “he stopped.” There’s so much I want to say to you,’ he said, turning to her. “So much I need to say.”

Padmé didn’t look at him, not wanting him to see the hurt in her eyes. “I don’t know what you can say to make up for the past ten years,” she told him.

“It wasn’t me who lied to you about the twins,” he pointed out. “You can thank the Jedi for that,” he added bitterly.

The thought of what they had done to her angered her greatly, and Vader sensed it. “Kenobi will pay for this,” he assured her. “I promise you.”

She looked up at him. “And what about the one who lied to you?” she asked pointedly. “Will he also pay?”

Vader said nothing, not wishing to divulge too much about his plans for the emperor at this point. “I’ll let you get ready for bed,” he said. “Have a good night.”

With that he left her, closing the door behind her. Padmé sat down on the edge of the bed, the reality of her situation hitting her full force. She ran her hands through her short hair, doing her best not to let herself grow despondent over a situation she didn’t know how to solve.

Chapter 32

Thirty-two

Alderaan

Breha Organa watched as her husband's ship made its approach to the palace grounds. She was angry, for it had been days since he'd last contacted her. And then, out of the blue, she had received a brief communiqué from him informing her that he and Obi-Wan would be arriving the next day. *Why did he bring him here?* She thought bitterly. *Hasn't he made enough mess already?*

"Your majesty, the Viceroy's ship has landed."

Breha turned to her maid servant. "Yes, I know," she said. "Tell him he'll find me in my study."

"Of course, Milady," the maid replied with a courtesy, and then left.

Breha folded her arms over her chest, preparing herself for the inevitable storm that would ensue once she told Bail of her trip to Naboo. She smiled, enjoying the fact that, for all their love of control, this time it was she who'd changed the course of destiny.

Coruscant

I race home, the excitement filling me, pressing me to hit the accelerator for all its worth. Dodging traffic like a man possessed, I race through the dark Coruscant night, my heart rate accelerating as I draw closer to my home, to my wife, my angel. She will be so thrilled— this will change our lives forever. No more nights apart, no more accounting for my every move, no more stolen moments.

The elevator ride has never seemed so long. It is late, Padmé will undoubtedly be home, she may even be asleep by now. I smile at the thought of waking her up in a manner that I know she loves.

The elevator door opens to darkness. I step inside, the lights coming on as the sensors detect my presence. I walk into the main room and see Padmé asleep on the sofa, the holonet news still on. They are talking about the battle that we have just won. I turn it off, tired of hearing about Praesitlyn.

I sit on the edge of the sofa and bend down to kiss Padmé on the cheek. She wakes with a start and looks up at me, disoriented for a moment.

"Ani?" she says sleepily.

I smile at her. "Hi beautiful," I reply simply.

"Ani!!" she cries, wrapping her arms around my neck tightly. "You're all right!! You're home!! I've been so worried!! When I heard about the way the battle ended, I was so scared... I thought I'd lost you!"

I stroke her long hair lovingly. It hadn't even occurred to me that she would think the worst; but of course the media always makes things far worse than they truly are.

"I'm fine, Padmé," I assure her. "I'm just fine."

She pulls back and studies my face, her hands framing it as though trying to convince herself that I am really here. She strokes my hair softly, and stops short when she reaches the place where my padawan braid has hung for more than ten years.

"Ani, your braid," she says, puzzled by its absence. "What happened to it?"

I reach inside my tunic and pull it out. "I told you one day it would be yours," I tell her, taking her hand and laying the braid across her small open hand.

She looks down at it for a moment and then back up at me, her eyes widening as she realizes what this means.

"Ani, you've been knighted!!" she says breathlessly.

I smile, the emotions welling up within me as I nod. "Yes, angel," I tell her. "I'm a Jedi Knight now."

She throws her arms around my neck once again, overcome with emotion. "I'm so proud of you!" she whispers as her tears fall onto my shoulder.

I smile, my own tears coming now. "Do you realize what this means, Padmé?" I ask her. "No more answering to the Jedi council for everything I do, no more master breathing down my neck. We can finally start to live a normal life!"

Her only response is to cover my neck in kisses. I smile, loving her enthusiasm. "I have another surprise for you," I tell her, pulling back to look into her eyes. "The Council has given me ten days furlough, Padmé. Ten days!"

"Oh Anakin, I can't believe it!" she replies with smile. "Ten days!"

I nod. "And I thought we could go away somewhere, get away from Coruscant and all our responsibilities here. How does ten days on Naboo sound?"

Padmé's expression tells me how she feels more than words ever could.

"We could have another honeymoon," she says softly, stroking my face. "Ten days alone, with no one to answer to, no duties to interrupt us."

I nod. "Yes, ten days to do whatever we want."

"It's like a dream," she says. "When can we leave?"

"How long do you need to get ready?" I ask with a smile.

"I can be ready in twenty minutes," she says. "Is that soon enough?"

I laugh as I stand up and hold my hands down to her. "I think I can wait that long."

Vader awoke from the beautiful dream, as the bitterness of reality crashed down around him. He would never see the look of love in Padmé's eyes again; he would never know the rush of desire in her arms again. She was alive, and for that miracle he was eternally thankful.

But she hated him, she resented him, and she wanted nothing whatsoever to do with him. And somehow, that was almost worse than believing her dead.

It was the middle of the night, but Vader knew he would get no more sleep. A paltry few hours was all he ever got, and he'd learned to cope with it. Donning his mask and helmet once more, he decided to get some work done with the time he had on his hands.

As he walked down the corridor towards his office, he heard the sound of breaking glass coming from the kitchen area. Frowning under his mask, he headed in the direction of the sound, prepared to reprimand any officer who had dared to come up to the family quarters without permission.

Entering the kitchen, Vader stopped, for it was not an officer or even a droid who knelt on the ceramic floor picking up the pieces of a broken glass, it was his wife. She wore a white nightgown, and as she bent forward to pick up the shards, Vader was afforded a rather generous view of her body beneath it. He felt a jolt of lust, like a bolt of electricity, rush through him, and forced himself to look away. It was then that she heard him and looked up with a start.

"I'm sorry about this," she said, embarrassed to have been found this way. "I... I just wanted a drink of water."

"Never mind that," he said as she stood up. "I have droids who can clean that up. You didn't cut yourself, I hope," he added, walking towards her.

"No," she said, turning to deposit the broken pieces in a waste receptacle. She turned back to pick up one more piece, and felt his eyes upon her. Realizing why he was watching her, she stood up, placing a hand over the top of her nightgown, her face growing pink as she realized what he must have seen. "I'll go now," she said, anxious to be out of his presence.

"Wait," he said as she made for the door. "You want something, don't you?"

Padmé turned back to look at him, ready to do battle if need be. "Excuse me?"

Vader walked towards her, crushing the remains of the broken glass under his boots. "You left your room in the middle of the night," he reminded her. "Surely you wanted something."

When Padmé said nothing in response, Vader lifted a hand and easily brought a glass down from a cupboard. "You wanted a drink of water, didn't you?" he asked, bringing the glass to her hand.

"Yes," she said, taking the glass. "I did. Thank you."

Vader said nothing in reply and simply watched as she left the room once more. And then he continued on his way to his office, pushing the images of Padmé out of his mind.

Alderaan

Breha sat listening while Obi-Wan and Bail explained, in rather condescending tones, their plans to take Luke and Leia from Vader. They had been working for more than a week, putting things into place, calling in favors from everyone they knew to make things happen. She simply listened, all the while waiting for her opportunity to blow their scheme out of the water.

"I'm afraid that isn't going to work," Breha said at last.

Obi-Wan lifted an eyebrow. "Oh? And how do you know that, Milady?" he asked.

Breha turned to him, hating the tone of condescension in his voice. "Because Padmé knows everything," she told them. "She knows the twins are alive, and she knows that they are in Vader's custody."

"What!" Bail exclaimed. "How did this happen? How did she..." "he stopped when the truth dawned on him." You told her, didn't you?" he asked his wife. "You went to Naboo?"

Breha nodded. "Yes, I did," she replied.

Bail did his best to hide his anger, but without much success. "I specifically told you not to do that!" he declared hotly. "I specifically told you..."

"I'm not one of your lackeys that you can order around, Bail," she interjected tersely. "In fact, if we want to get technical about it, I have more power than you do, Viceroy. I'm a queen, remember? So don't give yourself airs about telling me what I can and cannot do. Padmé needed to know, she deserved to know. And now she does. And may the pieces fall where they may," she concluded, and stood up and left the room.

Bail was too shocked by his normally mild mannered wife's assertion of power to speak for a moment, and simply turned to Obi-Wan with an expression of dismay.

"Looks like we need a new plan," Obi-Wan observed.

Bail nodded. "Yes, so it does," he replied, embarrassedly. "I'm sorry about this, Obi-Wan," he added. "This is so unlike Breha, really."

Obi-Wan smiled. "I have never married, Senator," he said. "But my observations of the fairer sex over the past forty seven years have been that it is never wise to underestimate or second guess a woman."

Bail smiled. "For a confirmed bachelor, you do have a good understanding of the female mind," he said. He sighed, and ran a hand over his beard. "I'm hungry," he said, standing up. "Let's get some dinner before we start working out a plan. I don't know about you, but I can't think on an empty stomach."

Obi-Wan stood up. "Something we have in common, Senator," he said. "Neither can I."

Coruscant

The twins were up early the next morning, each of them anxious to spend time with their parents. They'd missed their father, who had been gone close to a week, and now that they'd discovered their beloved Miss Kinsky was actually their mother, they were eager to get to know her better.

Padmé was already at the table sipping a cup of tea when the twins entered the room. She looked up at them and smiled. "Good morning," she said.

"Morning," Luke and Leia replied, each giving their mother a kiss on the cheek. Padmé's smile grew, the simple gesture meaning more to her than she'd imagined possible. "Did you sleep well?" Leia asked as she and Luke sat down.

“Pretty well, thanks,” Padmé replied, not bothering to tell them about the strange encounter she’d had with their father. “Ready to go shopping?”

“Yes, more than ready,” Leia declared with a smile.

“What about you, Luke?” Padmé asked. “Are you going to join us?”

“I don’t know,” he replied. “Shopping’s not really my thing,” he explained.

“He hates shopping,” Leia put in for good measure.

Padmé frowned slightly. “Oh, well maybe we ought to think of something that we’ll all enjoy,” she said.

Luke noticed the look of disappointment on Leia’s face and shook his head. “It’s okay, Mom,” he said. “You go ahead. I know Leia’s been dying to go shopping,” he said, rolling his eyes for good measure.

“What about you?” Padmé asked him.

“I have a model I’ve been working on,” Luke told her. ‘I’ve been waiting for Dad to come home to get him to help me,’ he added. “That’s more my thing.”

Padmé nodded. “Very well,” she said. “If you say so. Next time we’ll go somewhere you want, okay?”

Luke smiled. “Sure thing,” he said, and then started in on the breakfast the serving droid had set before him.

For the second time in as many meals, Vader joined his family, surprising the twins by his presence once more.

“We’re going shopping today, Dad,” Leia told him excitedly. “Just me and Mom!”

Vader looked at Padmé. “Is that so?” he asked, his disapproval clear in his voice.

“Yep,” Leia replied, returning to her breakfast. “We’re going to the beauty salon, aren’t we Mom?”

Padmé nodded, facing Vader. “Yes, that’s right,” she said. “I’m tired of being a red head.”

Vader nodded. “I’m sure,” he replied. “However going out shopping is out of the question,” he said.

Padmé frowned. “And why is that?” she demanded.

“Do I need to explain it?” he replied. “The media would have a field day if they saw you with Leia in public.”

“I don’t care about the media,” Padmé retorted. “So what if they see us? They already know you’re her father. Is it such a big deal if it’s known that your children have a mother?”

“I don’t give a damn what the public knows,” he said. ‘It’s more complicated than that. I have already explained the presence of Luke and Leia to the emperor,’ he told her. “But not yours. As far as he and the rest of the galaxy knows, you’re dead, Padmé. And believe me, you’re far safer if he continues to believe that.”

The mention of the emperor unnerved Padmé, and she fell silent.

“What if we bring Han with us?” Leia suggested. “He’s been great at keeping the media away from me and Luke,” she continued. “He could do the same for me and Mom.”

Vader hated to concede, but realized that he could not keep Padmé a prisoner in the house until such time as the emperor had been dealt with. “I suppose that would be acceptable,” he agreed finally.

“Han said something weird the other day, Dad,” Luke piped up. “And when I asked him what it meant he told me to ask you.”

“Oh?” Vader asked, noting the alarmed look on Padmé’s face at this point. “And what did he say?”

“He said that if his swimming teacher had looked like Mom he would like swimming a lot more than he does,” Luke replied, completely oblivious to the bomb he was dropping. “What do you think that means?”

Vader clenched his fists on the table top. “I think it means Han Solo will be looking for a new job,” he replied with a growl and then stood up.

“Wait,” Padmé said, turning to him as he started to storm out the door. “Don’t be so unreasonable. He meant no harm.”

Vader looked at her. “He was flirting with you, Padmé,” he stated hotly. “Am I supposed to just accept that?”

“He’s not the only one who flirts with Mom,” Leia put in. “She’s a beautiful woman, Dad. Is that so surprising?”

Vader said nothing in response, still not convinced he shouldn’t rip Han Solo’s heart out. “I don’t suppose it is,” he admitted at last.

“I can put the green contacts back in if it would make you feel better,” Padmé offered.

Vader was surprised by her suggestion. “Yes, perhaps that would be wise,” he said. “A disguise would be a wise precaution.”

Padmé nodded. “I agree,” she said, surprising herself. She looked at Leia. “I’ll be right back,” she said.

Vader watched her leave, and then signaled Han on his comlink.

“You’re not mad at Han, are you Dad?” Luke asked, wishing now he’d never brought the young officer’s name up.

Vader looked at his son. “I’m not happy with him,” he said simply. “What he said was disrespectful of your mother.”

“I thought he was paying her a compliment,” Leia remarked.

Vader wasn’t sure how to explain to his children the subtleties of flirting, for he knew that that was exactly what Han had done. Innocently, of course, for he had no idea who “Miss Kinsky” was. Vader smirked under his mask, relishing the thought of informing Solo of her

true identity. The young man's fear alone would surely be enough to ensure he protected Padmé and the twins with his life.

"You wanted to see me, Lord Vader?" Han asked as he appeared in the dining room.

"Yes," Vader replied. "I want you to accompany my daughter and her mother while they go shopping," he said.

Han's eyes widened. "Her... her mother?" he asked. "I thought that... I mean that..."

"Hello Han," Padmé said as she entered the room.

Han turned to see Miss Kinsky looking at him with her large green eyes. "Hey there Miss..." he stopped and looked back at Vader. 'Wait a minute,' he said, starting to put the pieces together. "Is she..." he stammered, and then looked back at Padmé, "are you?"

"Padmé is my wife, Lieutenant Solo," Vader said, enjoying the young man's discomfiture immensely. "The mother of my children."

Han's eyes widened yet again, and said nothing for a moment. "Well," he said. "Imagine that!"

Luke and Leia giggled at his embarrassment. Han looked at them, making a mental note to grill them later.

"All set?" Padmé asked her daughter.

Leia nodded and stood up. "Coming, Han?" she asked.

"Uh, yeah," Han replied. "Sure thing. This way ladies."

"Solo," Vader said as they were leaving.

Han turned back to his commander, fearing the worst. "Yes sir?"

"I don't need to remind you of the importance of your task today, do I?" he said.

Han shook his head. "No sir," he replied at once. "Not at all."

"Good," Vader said. He turned to Leia and Padmé. "Enjoy yourselves," he said, somewhat begrudgingly.

"We will!" Leia replied with a smile, and then left the room with her mother.

Luke giggled again, but stopped when he saw his father watching him. Without saying another word about Han Solo, Luke finished his breakfast.

Padmé and Leia spent the first half of the morning in an exclusive salon, where Padmé had the color removed from her hair. Leia was thrilled to see that her mother's hair shade was exactly like her own, and wanted to cut her hair right then and there to match Padmé's style. But Padmé managed to talk her out of it, convincing her that she herself had not wanted to cut her hair, and that she planned on growing it long. Leia was satisfied with this, and settled for a manicure and a pedicure along side her mother. They each had a rather bold color painted on their toenails, with a more subdued shade on their fingernails. Leia, who had never been permitted such luxurious by her adopted mother, was thrilled, and admired her nails repeatedly for the rest of the morning.

The mother and daughter duo were eating lunch in one of the small café's in Coruscant's shopping district, Han Solo sitting close by, when one of Leia's school mates spotted them and came up to the table.

"Hi Leia!" Kari said. 'Hi Miss Kinsky!' she added, looking at Padmé with a strange look. "You look different!"

"I had my hair done," Padmé told her. "How are you, Kari?"

"I'm good," she replied. "What are you two doing here together?"

Leia and Padmé said nothing, and exchanged a look. This was not a situation that they had discussed with Vader.

"Leia and I are just doing a bit of shopping," Padmé replied at last, deciding not to take the risk. "And we had our nails done too," she said as they showed off their newly painted nails to Kari.

"Cool!" Kari said. 'My mother would *never* let me get my nails done!' she looked at Leia. "Your dad won't mind?" she asked.

Leia shrugged, admiring her nails. "He won't care," she said. "Besides, my..." she stopped before she said something she shouldn't. "He won't even notice," she said instead.

"Well I think it's cool," Kari said. She looked over her shoulder. 'My mom is looking for me,' she said. "I'd better go. See you at school!" she said, waving to both Leia and Padmé before running off.

"That was close," Padmé said.

Leia nodded in agreement. "You don't think Dad wants us to keep this a secret, does he? I mean, I will be able to tell my friends, won't I?"

Padmé sighed. "I don't know, Leia," she replied. "I think it's wise to let him make that decision."

Leia was surprised to hear her mother say this. "I guess," she said. She pushed her salad around on her plate for a moment, working up the nerve to ask her mother a burning question in her mind. "Mom, why don't you like Dad anymore?" she asked.

Her daughter's question shocked Padmé for a moment, and she didn't know what to say. "What makes you think I don't like him?" she asked.

Leia smiled. "I can sense the feelings of others, Mom," she said. "Dad says it's because of the Force. I know that when you're around him you are upset, angry and hurt. Why? What happened between the two of you? I know he loves you as much as ever."

Padmé sighed. "Leia, it's a lot more complicated than us just loving one another," she said. "There is a lot of history between your father and me, far more than you and Luke realize. There's a reason I was in hiding for ten years," she continued. "Your father changed when he turned the dark side, Leia," she told her. "He isn't the same man that I married."

Leia frowned. "I don't understand," she said. 'I know he doesn't look the same, but that isn't his fault,' she added. "He had that terrible accident that forced him to wear that suit and

mask. Is that it? Are you afraid of him now?"

"No, that's not it," Padmé replied. 'If he was the same man I married it wouldn't matter what he looked like on the outside. The mask would mean nothing if he were Anakin Skywalker again,' she told her daughter. "But he isn't, he's Darth Vader," she added.

Leia sighed, wishing her mother could see the goodness that she herself saw in her father. Leia knew that Anakin Skywalker still existed within Darth Vader, and, she hoped, in a matter of time her mother would know it too.

"How are you making out, Luke?"

Luke looked up from the model he was working on to his father. "Almost done," he said. Vader nodded, watching as Luke carefully applied the final layer of epoxy.

"Dad, can I ask you something?" Luke said as he carefully set the model down to dry.

"Of course," Vader replied.

Luke looked up at his father. "How come Mom is so angry with you?"

Vader said nothing for a moment as he continued working on the piece of equipment he was preparing. "Your mother has not had an easy life, Luke," he told his son at last.

"What do you mean?" Luke asked. "Because she thought we were dead? Leia and me?"

"That's part of it," Vader replied. 'She... had difficulty accepting the changes in me,' he said. "When I embraced the Dark Side, when I stopped being Anakin Skywalker, she was not able to accept it. She resents me for that, and for other things."

"What things?" Luke asked.

Vader looked at his son, wondering how to tell his son how he had attacked his pregnant mother, how he had chosen to follow the monster he called Master rather than stay with her and raise their children. "We... had a serious disagreement and..."

"About what?" Luke persisted, starting to grow alarmed by the feelings from his father.

"About the path I had chosen," Vader told him. "I chose the Dark Side in order to save her, for I had foreseen her death in my dreams, and was convinced that the Dark Side was the only way to save her. But she didn't see it that way, I'm afraid. She only saw my actions as betrayal, and refused to believe that what I did I did for her," he concluded.

Luke found this very hard to believe, and sensed that there was far more to it than his father was telling him.

"Was it the emperor who told you that the Dark Side would save her?" Luke asked.

Vader was surprised by his son's intuition. "Yes, it was," he replied at last.

Luke nodded. "So... you know now that he lied about Mom's death," he said. "So is it possible that he lied about that too?"

Vader hated to admit that this was true, but there was no denying it. By now he felt certain that everything the emperor had ever told him was a lie. "Yes," he said simply. "It's possible. Come, this is ready," he said, handing Luke the tool he'd prepared.

Luke took the tool and fell silent, sensing that pushing his father any further was a bad idea right now.

Chapter 33

Thirty-three

Padmé and Leia arrived home late in the afternoon, and were followed by Han Solo who was carrying the majority of their shopping packages.

“That was fun,” Leia said as she and Padmé sat down in the common area between the twins’ rooms.

Padmé nodded with a smile. “Yes, it was,” she replied. She ran her hands over her hair. “I feel so much better now,” she said.

Leia laughed. “I liked it red too,” she said. “Mr. Wagar won’t be able to call you Red anymore,” she added.

Padmé rolled her eyes. “Oh him,” she said. ‘Your brother is right,’ she said. “He’s a duffus.”

Leia laughed again. “I can’t wait to see the look on his face when he finds out your Darth Vader’s wife,” she said.

Padmé lifted an eyebrow. “That will be interesting,” she said.

Just then Luke entered the room, and smiled when he saw that his mother had returned. “Hi,” he said, coming over to her. “You look different!”

“You like it?” Padmé said, running a hand over her hair again.

Luke nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “It looks more like it did in that holo Leia and I saw, except shorter.”

“What holo was that?” Padmé asked.

“Dad showed us the holovid of you and his wedding,” Leia explained. “You looked so beautiful in your wedding gown,” she added with a smile.

Padmé was shocked by this, even more so that he still possessed the holovid. “He showed you that?” she asked.

The twins nodded. “It wasn’t easy for him, but he knew we wanted to see you,” Luke explained. “He’s never been able to talk about you much.”

“Yes, Leia’s told me as much,” she said. She felt uncomfortable talking about this, and stood up. “I’m going to see if my room is ready,” she said, picking up her packages.

“Want some help unpacking?” Luke asked.

Padmé looked back at him. “Sure,” she said. “Come on you two.”

The room was ready, not only that, it was spectacular. It was clear that Vader had gone to a great deal of expense and trouble to make it so and for a moment Padmé could only stand and

look around.

“Wow,” Luke said, equally impressed. “This is amazing!”

Leia nodded, a smile spreading on her face. “He must love you a lot to go to all this trouble,” she said to her mother.

Padmé turned to her, but said nothing. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s get started.”

Later that evening

“And then we had our nails painted, see?” Leia told her father at the dinner table. “You like the color?”

“Yes,” Vader told her, not wanting to crush her enthusiasm. The truth was, with his visual receptors, the color was totally distorted to his eyes. “It’s very nice.”

Padmé looked at him, surprised by his gentle approach.

“Our toenails are a little darker,” Leia continued, proceeding to take off her shoes and socks to show him. “See?” she said, pulling one foot out from under the table to show him.

“Peeyou, what a smell,” Luke said, waving his hand in front of him. “Put your socks and shoes back on!”

“Shut up, Luke,” Leia said. ‘It’s your feet that stink, not mine!’

“Enough,” Vader said, stopping in before things escalated any further. “Leia, bare feet don’t belong at the dinner table, no matter how pretty they are,” he said. “Luke, don’t insult your sister. I’ve smelled your feet; you have nothing to say on the matter.”

Leia and Luke both looked at one another and giggled, loving their father’s dry sense of humor. Padmé was once again silent, and once again shocked. It seemed Vader had taken to parenting quite well, she realized. Clearly there was more to him than she’d originally thought.

“We saw Kari when we were having lunch,” Leia told Luke and their father. “But I didn’t tell her that Mom is my mother.”

“I think it’s going to be hard to keep that a secret,” Padmé commented at once. “All it will take is one of you to call me Mom at school by accident and it will be out.”

“Wait a minute,” Vader said, “you’re not planning on continuing your job at the school, are you?” he asked.

“Yes, why not?” Padmé asked. “I enjoy working with the children, and it gives me a chance to see a lot of Luke and Leia.”

“But there are other considerations,” Vader said. ‘Namely security and privacy,’ he added. “Do you really want the entire faculty to know about your personal life?”

“No,” Padmé admitted. “But didn’t you tell Jeslow already? He knows the truth.”

“He’s already forgotten it,” Vader told her. “I saw to that as he walked away from us.”

“Okay, but...”

“But nothing,” Vader interjected. “It’s a bad idea, Padmé. The media would be all over it in no time.”

Padmé sighed, hating to admit that he was right. “I suppose so,” she concurred at last. “I will miss being there, though,” she added.

“Mr. Wagar will miss you too,” Luke blurted out. Leia gave him a dirty look, but it was too late.

“What does that mean?” Vader asked. When no one replied, he grew angry. “Answer me!” he demanded.

“Uh, well,” Luke said nervously, “it’s just that... well...”

“Mr. Wagar has the hots for Mom,” Leia said. “He calls her Red, doesn’t he Mom?”

“Yes,” Padmé admitted. “He’s rather... persistent,” she added.

“Perhaps I need to have a conversation with this Wagar,” Vader replied hotly.

“And what will you tell him?” Padmé asked. “You just said you didn’t think anyone at the school should know the truth, didn’t you?”

Vader was silent, hating that she’d caught him this way. “Yes,” he said. “I did, but... in this case, I think...”

Luke and Leia smiled, amazed that their father had been rendered speechless. “She’s got you there, Dad,” Luke pointed out.

Vader didn’t find his son’s comment amusing, but said nothing. “Very well,” he said at last. “I will say nothing to Wagar. For now,” he added.

“So what did you do today, Luke?” Padmé asked, changing the subject.

“Dad and I worked on a model I’m making,” Luke told her. ‘It’s a model of a TIE fighter,’ he added. “Dad got it for me last week and I’ve been dying to build it, but he was away and I didn’t want to start it without him,” he finished, looking back at his father.

“I see you’ve inherited more than your father’s looks,” Padmé observed, looking at Vader as well. “He used to love to build things too as I recall.”

“He still does, don’t you Dad?” Luke said.

Vader nodded. “I do,” he agreed. “Of course, I don’t have the time to do it as often as I’d like,” he added.

“You’re not going away again soon, are you Dad?” Leia asked. “You just got home, after all.”

“I have no plans to,” Vader told her. “But I never know what tomorrow may bring, young one, you know that.”

“I know,” Leia replied. She looked at her mother. ‘It’s just that... it’s nice having all of us together this way,’ she said. “I don’t think we’ve ever all been together, have we? I mean, since we were born?”

Padmé and Vader looked at one another. “No, we haven’t,” Vader said. “I wasn’t even there when you two were born, regrettably,” he added.

Luke and Leia digested this silently, sensing that it wasn’t a good idea to ask too many questions on this topic. But there was one that both had been dying to know.

“So which one of us was born first?” Leia asked. “I think it was me,” she added, looking at Luke, who rolled his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Leia,” Padmé said with a smile. “I’m afraid you’re wrong on this one. Luke was born about three minutes before you. So technically, he’s your *older* brother.”

“Oh yeah, oh yeah!” Luke declared, his arms waving above his head. “I’m the older one, I’m the older one!”

Padmé couldn’t help but smile. “Sorry Leia,” she said.

Leia rolled her eyes with a sigh. “I’m *never* going to hear the end of this,” she grumbled.

“Don’t you two have a project you need to finish for school?” Vader asked. “One that is already late?”

“Oh yeah!” Luke said. “The family tree!”

“Why don’t you get your data pads while the table is being cleared,” suggested Padmé, “and we can work on them before bedtime.”

“Okay Mom,” Luke said, standing up. “Come on, little sister,” he added, grinning ear to ear.

Leia sighed loudly as she stood up, wishing she’d never asked the question of their birth order.

While the twins were gone, an awkward silence fell over Padmé and Vader, who merely sat and watched as the droid cleared the table. Both were very uneasy with the other, neither of them knowing what to say that wouldn’t result in a disagreement. Both were grateful when the twins hurried back to join them.

“Okay,” Leia said, activating her datapad. “This is what we have so far,” she told her parents, turning the work to show them. So far all that had been written in was Darth Vader as father and Padmé as mother.

“Well you can put my last name in now,” Padmé said. “Naberrie.”

Leia proceeded to enter the name. “Okay, your parents now,” she said, looking at her mother.

“Wait a minute,” Padmé said, still looking at the pad. “Don’t you think the name Anakin Skywalker should be here?” she asked, pointing to where Leia had entered Darth Vader.

“That’s what I thought,” Luke piped up.

“No, it’s correct the way it is,” Vader said. “Anakin Skywalker doesn’t exist.”

Padmé turned to him. “That’s quite obvious,” she replied. “But he *is* the father of Luke and Leia,” she insisted.

Vader did his best not to grow annoyed, but she was making it difficult not to. “I am the father of Luke and Leia,” he said finally. “And that is not my name.”

“It’s your real name,” Padmé pointed out. “The name your mother gave you. Darth Vader is the name the emperor gave you, remember?”

“Yes, I remember,” he said, his voice rising incrementally. ‘But the fact remains that it is my name!’

“I don’t care,” Padmé retorted hotly. “That is *not* the name of the father of my children!”

“You’re being completely unreasonable!” Vader shot back.

“That’s only because you’re being a complete...”

“Would you two stop it?!” Leia cried at last, unable to stand it any more. She stood up, grabbing the datapad as she did so. “Just stop it! Why can’t you two just get along? Luke and I have lived our whole lives without our real parents, and now that we’re finally together, we have to listen to this constant bickering between the two of you? I hate this!” she cried, and ran out of the room. Luke stood up slowly; looking a little embarrassed for his sister’s outburst, and left the room after her. Once again Padmé and Vader were left alone.

“I’m going to bed,” she said, standing up.

Vader said nothing, but merely watched her leave the room, the tension between them rife. Finally he too rose to his feet, and headed for his office, knowing that he would have no rest this night.

Once he’d reached his office, Vader signaled for Captain Kassel to report to him. In all the excitement over finding Padmé, Vader had all but forgotten about the problem of Vansic Jokar and his untimely demise. But he was certain that the emperor had not forgotten about his trusted aide, and Vader realized that he was taking an enormous risk by not ensuring that the situation had been dealt with.

“Yes sir?”

Vader looked up to where Kassel stood inside the door. “What have you done about that problem I told you about?”

“Well, I did some research on the man,” Kassel replied. ‘And learned that he was very allergic to cayenne pepper,’ he continued. “So I reported that he had accidentally ingested a small amount of it in his dinner,” he went on, a smile starting to form on his face, “and that he choked to death as a result of an anaphylactic reaction.”

Vader was impressed by the young man’s resourcefulness, not to mention his imagination. “Excellent,” he said. “You’ve done well, Captain.”

Kassel’s smile grew under his commander’s praise. “Thank you, Lord Vader,” he replied. “Is Lady Vader all settled in?” he asked.

Vader didn’t reply to this, and stood up from his desk. He walked over to the window, his hands clasped behind his back. “I suppose so,” he replied finally. “Have you ever been married, Kassel?” he asked.

Kassel was surprised by the question, even more so by the level of familiarity Vader had assumed with him. “Yes sir,” he replied finally. “It didn’t work out, though,” he added.

Vader turned to him. “What went wrong?” he asked.

Kassel shrugged. “Well, my job mainly,” he said. “She wanted to settle down, have a family, and I was just starting out my career. She got tired of waiting, I guess,” he decided.

Vader nodded. “I see,” he replied.

Kassel got the distinct impression that things were not going well between Vader and his wife, but he didn’t dare ask about it. He knew the boundaries well, and had lasted in his job as long as he had for knowing when to keep his mouth shut. “Is there anything else I can do for you, sir?” he asked.

“No,” Vader replied. “You’re dismissed.”

“Goodnight, sir,” Kassel replied and headed for the door.

Vader said nothing, and simply turned back to the window to stare out at the darkening Coruscant sky.

Chapter 34

Thirty-four

Padmé tossed and turned as she tried in vain to fall asleep. She felt terrible about the ugly scene her children had been forced to witness earlier, and was anxious to make things better. The trouble was, she didn't know how to do so. It was clear that she and Vader had many issues that prevented them from being friendly with one another. *But surely we can be civil*, she told herself; *is that too much to ask?*

Deciding that she'd not get any sleep until she'd tried to resolve this situation, Padmé got out of bed. She left the room, and looked down the corridor where the twins were sleeping. Chances are they were already asleep, but she decided she'd check on them just in case.

Arriving at the twins' rooms, Padmé noted with dismay that the lights were out. No doubt the children were already asleep. However, it soon became apparent that she was not alone. The now familiar sound of Vader's mechanical breathing was heard from within the suite, and Padmé had to fight the urge to leave at once. However, she was curious to see why he was here, and followed the sound into Leia's room. Padmé stopped when she saw Vader seated on the edge of their daughter's bed. He was simply watching Leia as she slept, his back to Padmé.

"She's been restless," Vader told his wife, knowing that she was there without seeing her. "I came to check on her."

Padmé nodded, more than a little surprised by his sensitivity. "Nightmares?"

She asked.

"No," Vader said, standing up and turning to face her. "Just... emotional upset."

"Yes, I'm sure of that," Padmé sighed, looking down at Leia as she slept. "I feel awful about what they witnessed earlier," she told him quietly.

"It was... regrettable," he agreed. "Perhaps this isn't the best place for a conversation," he suggested.

"You're right," Padmé agreed, and followed him out of the room. Vader proceeded down the corridor to the large room across from his office. They each took a seat, and for a moment, no one spoke.

"About what happened earlier," Padmé spoke up at last. 'It's clear that you and I have some serious issues,' she said, summoning her best diplomatic stance. "But for the sake of our children, I think it's best if we avoid confrontations in front of them. It's not good for them to hear us fighting that way."

"I agree," Vader said. "Luke and Leia are both very sensitive, and very intuitive. They know there is a lot of tension between us; I'm not sure how to keep that from them."

“We can’t,” she replied. “But at the same time, we can’t let our problems impinge on their sense of security. They’ve spent ten years apart from one another and from us; the least we can do is make their lives as secure and happy as we can now. And if that means pretending to get along, then so be it.”

Vader was silent, and Padmé wished, not for the first time, that she could see his face. He’d always shown his feelings clearly on his face, in his eyes. *I miss his face*, she thought wistfully, looking into the expressionless black orbs that were now his eyes. *I miss his eyes*.

“Pretending to get along won’t fool them for long,” Vader said at last. “They are very strong with the Force, Padmé. They will know if we are being deceptive.”

“Then what do you suggest?” she asked.

“I suggest we try to resolve our differences,” he said. “Is that so unimaginable?”

Padmé looked down at her hands folded in her lap. “I don’t know,” she said quietly. “We’re not the same people we were ten years ago, so much has happened.”

Vader watched her. “No, we’re not,” he agreed. ‘But we once shared something very powerful,’ he continued. “Something unique. Surely that should count for something.”

Padmé looked up at him. “Yes we did,” she agreed. ‘But so much as changed since then,’ she hastened to add. “You’ve changed. You changed when you chose the Dark Side over our family.”

“You still don’t understand why I embraced the Dark Side, do you?” he asked, starting to grow frustrated. “I did it to save you! Why can’t you see that?”

“It may have started out that way,” she conceded, “but in the end, was it for me or for the power Palpatine promised you that you chose the Dark Side? If you did it for me, why did you try to kill me when I came to you on Mustafar?”

Vader stood up at this point, her questions agitating him, stirring up emotions and memories he’d long since learned to suppress. “When I saw Kenobi, I...I lost it,” he told her.

“You thought I’d brought him there to kill you,” she reminded him.

“What else was I to believe?” he asked, turning back to her.

“That I would never have done such a thing,” she replied at once. ‘That I loved you too much to even consider betraying you,’ she added. “That I would have followed you to the ends of the universe if I needed to.”

Her words silenced Vader, and he turned away again. “Not a day has passed since then that I haven’t hated myself for what I did on that day,” he told her. “But all the regrets in the universes can’t change it. It happened, and I know you’ll never forgive me for it.”

“I did forgive you,” she told him. “I told Obi-Wan that I knew there was still good in you moments before I lost consciousness after Luke and Leia’s birth. But when I was told that the twins died, I blamed you for their death. I’ve spent the past ten years believing you were responsible for their death. That’s a long time to harbor bad feelings.”

"It is," he agreed. 'But now you know that what you believed wasn't true,' he pointed out. "The twins are alive, I didn't kill them."

"No, you didn't," she agreed. She sighed, and ran a hand through her tousled hair. 'I'm angry,' she said. "I feel like I've wasted ten years of my life because of a lie," she continued.

Vader nodded. "Yes, I feel the same way," he told her. "But it was not I who lied to you, Padmé. I can understand why you'd hate me for Mustafar, but I didn't lie to you about the twins."

"I know," she replied. She looked up at him. "So why is it we can't get along? Why is it we fight about everything?" she asked.

Vader said nothing for a moment, unsure of what to say in response. "I don't know," he replied, turning away from her. "Perhaps because we've both changed, perhaps..." he stopped, not wanting to finish the sentence. The thought that she didn't love him anymore was simply too painful to even consider.

Padmé felt as though she knew what it was he had left unsaid. *He doesn't love me anymore*, she thought, shocked by how painful the thought of this was to her.

"I think I understand," she said, standing up suddenly. "But regardless of what we feel about the other, we must make an effort to get along, at least in front of the children."

"Agreed," Vader said, turning to her. He tried to see what was going through her mind, for her body language was telling him that she was very hurt. "For Luke and Leia's sake I suggest we call a truce," he said.

Padmé lifted an eyebrow. "A truce? Has it come to this?" she asked, folding her arms over her chest.

"So it seems," Vader replied, his eyes travelling over her briefly, noting the hint of cleavage that peeked out over the top of her nightgown. *Force, she is still so beautiful*, he thought in frustration. *Does she have any idea the power she has over me? Even now?*

"I'm going to bed," she said, growing uneasy by the way he was looking at her. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," Vader replied, and watched her leave, deciding that his life had suddenly become much more complicated.

As for Padmé, she returned to her bed, shocked to find herself trembling with emotion. She lay down, closing her eyes against the tears that filled them.

It wasn't long before Padmé fell asleep, and the emotional turmoil she was going through caused her to fall into a vivid and somewhat disturbing dream...

I wake up in unfamiliar surroundings, and the first thing I notice is that I'm thirsty. The room I'm in is unfamiliar, but I know that there is a fresher ensuite. I stumble out of bed, activating the lights as I do. Squinting in the sudden brightness I make my way to the fresher. Great... a sink but no tumbler, not even a small one. I briefly consider drinking from my hand, but I'm very thirsty, the heat in this house is more than I'm accustomed to. Deciding that I will have to leave the sanctuary of my private quarters, I leave the room.

The house is quiet as I pad through the corridors on bare feet. I haven't finished unpacking, and couldn't be bother looking for him slippers or even my robe. I remember passing by the kitchen earlier, and find it again easily.

Opening the cupboards, the first thing I notice is how high everything is. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised, considering how tall the master of the house is. No, I can't think of him... it just hurts too much to think of him. I find the cupboard where the glasses are kept, and reach up as high as I can. I can touch it, and almost have it in my hand when it slips from my grip and crashes to the floor, shattering instantly against the cold ceramic tile.

"Great," I mutter, and get down on my knees, bending forward to pick up the pieces of glass. I have almost got them all when I hear the sound that still makes me have chills: the mechanical breathing of the man who was once my husband. I look up at him quickly and notice that he is simply watching me. Embarrassed, I look away. 'I'm sorry about this,' I mumble. "I... I just wanted a drink of water."

"Never mind that," he says as I stand up. "I have droids who can clean that up. You didn't cut yourself, I hope," he adds, walking towards me.

"No," I say, turning to deposit the broken pieces in a waste receptacle. I turn back to pick up one more piece, and feel his eyes upon me again. Suddenly I realize why he's watching me; and glance down at the front of my nightgown. I'm sure he's been looking at me, at my body, and stand up at once, putting a hand over the top of my nightie. I can feel my face growing red as I do so, and glance up at him nervously. "I'll go now," I say, anxious to be out of his presence.

"Wait," he says as I make for the door. "You want something, don't you?"

I turn back to look at him, ready to do battle if need be. "Excuse me?"

He walks towards me, crushing the remains of the broken glass under his boots. "You left your room in the middle of the night," he reminds me. "Surely you wanted something."

"Yes," I tell him, "a glass of water. I was thirsty."

He doesn't stop until he's standing right in front of me, so close that I have to crane my neck to face him. "Are you sure that's all you want, Padmé?" he asks, reaching over to lean one large gloved hand against the door frame, effectively trapping me in the room.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I tell him, starting to grow alarmed.

"Ten years, Padmé," he says, not moving a centimeter. "Ten years is a long time to be alone," he continues.

"Yes it is," I concur, not sure if he's implying what I think he is.

"I thought I'd learned to deal with the feelings," he tells me, bringing his other hand up and running it slowly over my bare arm. 'I thought I didn't need you anymore. But I was wrong,' he tells me, his hand finding the side of my neck. "And I think if you admit it, you'll know that you need me too."

I swallow hard, his hand working its way into my hair. I hate what he's doing, hate how he's manipulating me, but I can't deny how his touch makes me feel, even now.

“Even if that were true,” I tell him, ‘you’re not capable of giving me what I need,’ I tell him, shocking myself with my boldness. “Not now, not any more.”

“What makes you so sure?” he says. “I promise you, Padmé, I’m still very much a man under this suit, a man who wants you...”

Padmé shook herself out of her sleep, the dream far too intense to allow it to continue. She sat up in her bed, running her hands into her hair. She closed her eyes tightly, willing herself not to think about the implications of her dream.

The next morning at breakfast, Padmé was relieved to see that Vader had decided not to join them. She took advantage of his absence to speak to the twins.

“I wanted to apologize for the row you two had to witness last night,” Padmé said as Luke and Leia began to eat their breakfast. “It wasn’t right for us to air our differences that way, and I want you to both know that it won’t happen again.”

Luke and Leia looked at one another.

“You mean you’ve worked through all your problems?” Leia asked hopefully.

“Well, not exactly,” Padmé replied. “But I don’t want you to worry about that.”

“How can we not worry?” Luke asked. ‘All we want is for the four of us to be a real family,’ he said. “How can that happen if you and Dad don’t even like each other?”

“It’s not that we don’t like each other, Luke,” Padmé said, ‘it’s just that... we have some issues we need to resolve. But we’re not going to let that interfere in your happiness,’ she said, looking at Leia next. “I promise you.”

Luke and Leia looked at one another again, as though unsure if they ought to believe their mother.

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Leia asked.

Padmé smiled. “No, I’m afraid not,” she said. ‘This is just something that we’re going to have to deal with ourselves,’ she added. “But thank you for asking.”

Just then Vader entered the room, and all three Force sensitives in the room felt Padmé’s tension level skyrocket.

“Good morning,” he said, noting how his wife didn’t look up at him.

“Hi Dad,” Luke and Leia said as he took a seat.

“Good morning,” Padmé said, looking at him briefly, willing herself not to think of the dream she’d had the previous night.

“Mom are you going to keep giving me swimming lessons?” Luke asked his mother. “I’d hate to stop now.”

Padmé looked at Luke, and then at Vader. “I’d like to, Luke,” she said. “Very much.”

“What do you say, Dad?” Luke asked. “Can I keep having lessons?”

“Yes,” Vader replied. “But not at the school.”

Padmé frowned, bracing herself. “Where then?” she asked. “I don’t suppose you have a pool in this building?” she asked.

“No,” Vader replied. “But I will have one installed so that you can continue giving Luke lessons,” he said.

“You mean our own pool?” Leia asked excitedly.

“Is that something you’d like?” Vader asked.

“Mom and I would both love it, wouldn’t we Mom?” Leia asked, looking up at her mother.

Padmé looked at her, and then nodded. “Yes, I would,” she replied. She looked at Vader. “Good idea,” she said.

Vader nodded, pleased and somewhat surprised by her response.

“Very well,” he said. “I will have the workmen begin right away.”

“Thanks, Dad!” Luke said with a smile. “Mr. Wagar will be so surprised when I come to class knowing how to swim pretty soon,” he added.

“Mr. Wagar will be surprised when Mom doesn’t come back to work,” Leia put in. “And disappointed too.”

“Let him be,” Padmé said, watching Vader for his reaction. “I’m sure there are plenty of other women in the school he can lavish his unwanted attention on.”

Luke and Leia laughed, but Vader said nothing, and simply turned his attention to the data pad he’d brought with him.

Chapter 35

Thirty-five

Administrator Jeslow entered his office early to find a message waiting for him from one of his staff members. It was a simply written resignation letter, which offered very little by way of explanation. Jeslow frowned as he read it over again, wondering what had happened to Ania Kinsky that would make her want to resign. She had only been with Veslack for a short time; what had caused her to leave on such short notice? *What was it about her, anyway?* He thought as he scrolled down to the rest of his messages. There was something on the edge of his memory, something he couldn't quite remember. Perhaps the students she worked with had something to do with it; *or maybe it was that womanizer, Wagar*; he reflected. It wasn't a secret how Wagar had taken a liking to Ania, for he wasn't terribly subtle. Had he driven her away?

"Good morning sir."

Jeslow looked up to see his assistant, Inid. "Morning," he said. "Do you know anything about Ania Kinsky resigning?" he asked.

The woman's eyes widened. "She resigned?"

Jeslow nodded. "Yes, with no explanation whatsoever and it's effective immediately. It's very strange," he said, the frown returning to his face.

"Maybe she got a better position elsewhere," the assistant suggested.

Jeslow snorted. "There is no better educational facility on this planet, Inid. You know that."

Inid nodded. "Maybe she ran off and got married," she said with a smile. "She certainly was a pretty one."

"Yes, she was that," he admitted. "At any rate, we have to find someone to replace her."

"I'll get on that right away," Inid said.

Vader residence

"Luke! Leia! Hurry up or you'll be late for school!"

Leia emerged from her room first, looking the picture of organization.

"Where is your brother?" Padmé asked.

"He's still getting dressed," Leia said. "He got toothpaste on his shirt."

Padmé looked in exasperation at Vader, who stood by, not seeming terribly surprised by their son's tardiness. "Does this happen often?" she asked.

"Almost daily," he replied. "He inherited your tardiness," he couldn't resist adding.

Padmé's eyes widened at this. "My tardiness?" she asked. "I think you've got that backwards."

"I don't think so," he replied simply. "I seem to recall waiting a great deal while you....fixed your hair."

Leia couldn't help but giggle at this, enjoying the rare light moment between her parents.

"I'm coming!" Luke said as he ran into the hall, one arm in his jacket, his school bag hooked over the other arm, its contents precariously close to spilling out onto the floor.

"Luke, you're going to lose all your things," Padmé said, closing up his haversack. "My goodness," she added, helping him on with his jacket. She looked over at Vader, who watched with silent amusement. She didn't need to see his face to know that he was smiling.

"Are we ready now?" Vader finally asked when Padmé finished fussing over Luke.

"Yes," Luke said, allowing his mother to slick down his hair. "I'm ready."

"Very well," he said. "Let's be off then. Say goodbye to your mother," he added.

Padmé looked up at him. "I'm coming too," she said.

Luke and Leia looked at one another, sensing another row in the making.

"And how do you plan to explain your presence in my vehicle should you be seen?" Vader asked.

"Are you going to keep me a secret forever?" she countered. "I don't want to stay in this house all day, hidden away."

Vader sighed, realizing that she did have a valid point. "Can we discuss this after I get the kids to school?" he asked. "They're almost late already."

Padmé looked at the twins, realizing that he was right. "Yes, of course," she said at last. She gave each of them a hasty hug and kiss and then watched as they left with their father. Then she walked into the twins' rooms to tidy up the mess that Luke had surely left in his haste to leave. She smiled as she looked around her son's room, which, as she had anticipated, was utterly disorganized.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Miss Padmé?" Threepio asked as he entered the room, followed by his short companion.

"No," Padmé said, starting on the pile of clothes on Luke's bed. "I can manage."

"But Miss, this is my job," Threepio protested.

Padmé looked up at him. "I'm Luke's mother," she said. "I want to do it, okay?"

Threepio didn't quite understand why she wanted to menial housework when there were droids to do the job, but decided to let her do it nonetheless. Padmé found it therapeutic to tidy up for her son, something she'd not done in the boy's first ten years of life. As she put his clothes away, she noted that many of the garments were quite old, and worn. She pulled one of the shirts off of the hangar and examined it. The fabric reminded her of the clothes that Anakin had worn when he was a boy on Tatooine, and she realized that this shirt must have

been one that Luke had worn when he had lived on Tatooine. Padmé smiled sadly when she noted how many times the sleeves had been let out, how many times the mismatched buttons had been replaced. No doubt Luke's life until now had been one of hardship. She thought back to all the birthdays she's missed, twenty in all if she counted both children. Twenty birthday cakes, twenty birthday presents that Luke and Leia had missed out on. And then she had an idea.

"Threepio!" she called.

The droid appeared after a moment. "Yes Milady?"

"Tell Captain Kassel I need a vehicle," she said. "I'm going shopping."

Threepio did as he was told, as Padmé quickly finished tidying up her son's room. Then she went to her own quarters and slipped the green contact lenses into her eyes before finding a hooded cloak that would serve to help conceal her face. Padmé knew that Vader would be angry with her for leaving the house this way, but she decided that she didn't care. The way she saw it, this was part of the healing process that she and the twins needed to go through to recover from the long separation they'd endured. If their father didn't like it, too bad.

"You need me, Milady?" Captain Kassel asked as Padmé appeared in the hangar bay.

"Yes," she said. "I need a vehicle."

Kassel hadn't known Padmé long, but knew her well enough to know that once she'd made up her mind, it was next to impossible to change it. "Uh... does Lord Vader know about this?" he asked.

"No," Padmé replied. 'He's not my keeper, Captain,' she replied. "I come and go as I please."

Kassel didn't believe this for a minute, but didn't dare to question Vader's wife. "Why don't I take you where you want to go?" he said at last. 'Coruscant traffic is nuts this time of day,' he added. "And... I think I'd feel a whole lot better if I came along."

Padmé nodded, realizing the difficult position she was putting the man in. "Very well," she said. 'But I want to go right now,' she said. "I have a lot of shopping to do."

Kassel stepped aside as Padmé walked up to the closest speeder, rolling his eyes as he did so. *Vader's going to kill me*, he thought as he climbed in beside Padmé. *He's going to have my head on a platter...*

"All set?" she asked.

"Yep," Kassel replied. "Let's go."

Vader arrived at home shortly after Padmé had departed with Kassel. Right away he noted that one of his many speeders was missing, and it set him in a foul mood.

"Kassel!" he bellowed as he entered the living quarters. When he received no reply, he activated his comlink to contact the captain.

"Kassel here," came the disembodied reply.

"Where are you?" Vader asked suspiciously.

“Uh... on the north side of the center of town,” Kassel replied.

“Why?” Vader demanded.

“Well, sir, Lady Vader needed to do some shopping, and I offered to take her since I figured you wouldn’t like her going alone,” he said.

Vader was silent for a long time as he fought the anger that was bubbling up within him. Kassel looked at Padmé, who seemed very unconcerned by the whole thing.

“Quick thinking, Kassel,” Vader said at last, feeling certain that Padmé had given him very little choice in the matter. ‘Make sure the media stays well away from her,’ he added. “And tell her we’ll discuss this when she gets home.”

“I’ll tell her, sir,” Kassel said, looking at Padmé. ‘Kassel out. Well, you heard him,’ he said to Padmé. “He didn’t sound too happy, did he?”

“Does he ever sound happy?” Padmé asked.

Kassel smirked, realizing that she was absolutely right. “Where to first, Milady?”

As Vader walked to his office he was suddenly reminded of just how stubborn his wife was. He’d learned long ago not to try and dissuade her from a course of action that she’d decided upon. His mind hearkened back to a time long ago, before the Clone War, before the Darkness....

“They’ll never get to him in time!” she tells me. ‘Geonosis is half way across the galaxy! Look,’ she tells me, indicating a star chart on the console. “Geonosis is only a parsec away.”

“If he’s still alive,” I reply glumly.

“Ani, are you just going to sit here and do nothing to help him?” she asks. “He’s your mentor, your best friend!”

“He’s like my father,” I tell her. “But what am I supposed to do, Padmé? Master Windu gave me strict orders to stay here.”

“They gave you orders to protect me,” she counters, “and I’m going to help Obi-Wan. If you want to protect me, you’ll just have to come along.”

Her feistiness brings a smile to my face, and I take my seat beside her as she prepares the ship for take off.

That feistiness has never changed, Vader realized, smirking as he thought of the difficult spot Kassel must have been put in. *She probably threatened to leave without him*, he mused. It was going to be difficult to keep her a secret, he realized, perhaps impossible. *And how will I explain her presence to the emperor? It’s only a matter of time before he finds out that she’s living her, that she’s alive... unless he’s known all along...* Anger at his master filled him once more, and his fists clenched tightly. *You won’t take her from me again, my master*, he vowed darkly. *You won’t win this time.*

Veslack Academy

“Did you hear? Miss Kinsky quit,” Pati told Leia as the girls sat down to eat lunch together.

“Yes, I know,” Leia replied nonchalantly. “I wonder why?”

Pati watched her friend closely getting the feeling that Leia knew more than she was letting on. “Kari told me that she saw you and Miss Kinsky together on the weekend,” she said.

“That’s right,” Leia replied.

“Why were you out with her?” Pati asked. “Didn’t your dad get home yesterday?”

“Yes.”

“And he let you go out with Miss Kinsky?” Pati asked.

“Why not?”

“Because your dad is like the strictest parent in the universe,” Pati pointed out. “And because he’s never as much as met Miss Kinsky,” she added.

Leia looked at her friend, whom she had only really known a few weeks. She had to wonder who it was that was looking for information, Pati or Pati’s mother, who had the reputation of being something of a gossip monger. Leia sensed that it would be poor judgment to trust her with this secret, and so she thought a lie up quickly.

“She’s been teaching Luke how to swim,” Leia explained calmly. “And my father was grateful to her for it. Simple as that.”

Pati nodded, deciding that Leia’s explanation was logical. “Gee, maybe you can set her up with your dad,” she said with a smile. “He’s not married, is he?”

Leia frowned. “My dad’s a widower,” she said. “That’s not very funny.”

“Oh, sorry,” Pati mumbled, feeling foolish.

Leia felt badly for lying to her friend, and decided to change the subject.

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s get outside before Mr. Partlow blows his whistle.”

“Don’t you mean Mr. *Fartlow*?” Pati giggled as they picked up their trays.

Leia giggled too as they made their way to the exit.

Vader residence

“Thank you Captain,” Padmé said as Kassel helped her carry her multitude of parcels into her quarters. “You’ve been very helpful.”

“No need to thank me, Milady,” Kassel said, by now captivated by Padmé’s charm. “It was my pleasure.”

Padmé gave him one last smile before he left. She then pulled off her cloak and tossed it onto the end of the bed. Next she headed into the fresher to remove the contact lenses which had begun to irritate her eyes. When she came back into her bedroom, she gave a start, for Vader was standing in her room, waiting for her.

“You scared me,” she said.

“That wasn’t my intention,” he said, looking at all the parcels. “It seems your shopping expedition was a fruitful one,” he remarked dryly.

“Yes it was,” she said, sitting down on the end of the bed and opening up one of the parcels. “I got everything I needed.”

“And then some,” he added. He hesitated before saying what was foremost on his mind, knowing that he was risking another argument by doing so. ‘I have no intention of forcing you to stay here,’ he told her. “But I would appreciate it if you would let me know when you want to go out.”

She looked up at him. “You weren’t here,” she pointed out.

“No,” he concurred. “But Kassel has a comlink,” he pointed out.

“And he told you where I was with it,” she added.

Vader sighed, starting to grow frustrated. “Perhaps I ought to get you one as well,” he said. “That way you won’t have to rely on him or anyone else to communicate with me.”

“Yes, that’s probably for the best,” she agreed as she started pulling the contents of the package out and setting them on the bed. Vader watched her for a moment, trying to determine why she had bought the things she had.

“You... needed these things?” he asked finally.

She looked back up at him. “They’re not for me,” she explained. “They’re for Luke and Leia.”

“All of this?” he asked, looking around. “This is all for them?”

Padmé nodded. “There are ten gifts for each of them,” she told him. “One for each birthday that I’ve missed,” she added, her voice faltering at the end of the sentence.

Vader could sense how emotional she was, and sensed that doing this was in some way part of the healing that she would undoubtedly need to undergo now that she’d found their twins. “They will be delighted,” he said at last. “It was a thoughtful thing to do.”

She looked back up at him, her eyes bright with tears. “I had to do it,” she said softly. ‘I’ve missed so much,’ she told him. “Their first steps, their first tooth, their first words...” She stopped as her emotions threatened to get the better of her. The last thing she wanted was for to lose control in front of him.

“I know,” he said simply. Sensing that she needed to be alone, he turned and left her, wishing he had the right words to say to make it all better.

Chapter 36

Thirty-six

Padmé spent the rest of the afternoon wrapping the mountain of presents that she had purchased for the twins. She knew it was frivolous to do so, that they were simply going to open them all up in a fraction of the time it took her to wrap them. But she didn't care; the joy that opening the gifts would bring Luke and Leia far outweighed any other considerations.

Padmé didn't see Vader for the rest of the afternoon, and for that she was grateful. It seemed that they were incapable of getting along for more than a short time, and it made for a very stressful situation. She remembered that she and Anakin had occasionally had disagreements, for both of them had always been very strong willed. But somehow, this was different. Somehow there was an undercurrent of bitterness and resentment that made their rows far more volatile, far more hurtful. And while Padmé had come to realize that it wasn't Vader who had deprived her of ten years with the twins, she still blamed him for the upheaval in her life. But he wasn't the only one responsible; Palpatine was the true mastermind behind it all. He'd used Anakin all his life, and in the end, had stolen his very soul in return for an empty promise of power. *And yet he serves him still*, she thought, scarcely able to believe it. A feeling of cold fear suddenly washed over Padmé as she thought of Luke and Leia. Did the emperor know of their existence? Surely he must; Sola knew, and so must the whole galaxy by now. So what were his intentions? What were Vader's? The thought that Vader would turn her precious twins into Siths made Padmé's blood run cold. She knew that both Luke and Leia were very strong with the Force, just like their father. Was it Palpatine's intention to destroy them as he had destroyed their father? Was that the reason he'd allowed Vader to keep them in his life? The more she pondered this, the angrier she got. So when Captain Kassel appeared, Padmé confronted him.

"Where is Lord Vader?" she demanded.

Kassel was taken aback by Padmé's vehemence, as well as the fact that she was inquiring after her husband, something she had not done since she'd come to live in his home.

"He had meetings all day," Kassel told her. "And then he was going to pick up the twins. He has another meeting tonight as well," he told her. "Is there something I can help you with, Milady?"

"No," she replied. "Thank you Captain. This is something I need to discuss with him personally."

"I'm not sure how long he'll be home today, to tell you the truth," Kassel told her. "He's got a pretty busy day."

"I see," Padmé replied. "I suppose maybe I should make an appointment," she quipped.

Kassel smiled. "Not a bad idea," he said. "It would ensure you get a chance to talk to him uninterrupted."

Padmé nodded. “Thank you Captain,” she said. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Veslack Academy — later that day

Vader glanced at the chrono in the speeder, wondering if he should have asked Kassel to pick up Luke and Leia. As much as he hated meetings, he hated being late even more. All he needed was for one crony to make a casual remark to the emperor about his tardiness for things to become even more complicated in his life. He still had not decided what he would tell Palpatine about Padmé, how the emperor would react to learning that Vader’s wife was now living with him and their children. *He will no doubt be pleased by how much my wife hates me*, he reflected darkly. *Perhaps that alone will appease him.*

“Hi Dad!”

Vader looked over to see his twins coming towards him, a tall man he didn’t recognize accompanying him. He got out of the speeder to wait for them. Vader frowned, sensing the man’s nervousness at once. *Who is this?* He wondered, noting how young and fit the man was. It brought to mind how he had once looked, handsome and strong. *Padmé would find me repulsive, now*, he thought in frustration. *She’d be right to.*

“Dad, this is Mr. Wagar,” Leia said, indicating the young man beside them. “Mr. Wagar, our father, Lord Darth Vader.”

“It’s good to meet you, sir,” Wagar said, extending a hand to Vader.

Vader shook the man’s hand, squeezing it a little tighter than he normally would. “Wagar,” he said, remembering what his children had told him about him.

“I don’t want to hold you up,” Wagar said, flexing his hand after Vader had released it, “but I just wanted to let you know how awesome Luke did today in the pool. The lessons he’s been getting have really helped a lot.”

Vader nodded. “I understand Miss Kinsky is an excellent teacher,” he replied, watching the young man for his reaction.

Wagar smiled. “Oh yeah,” he said. ‘She’s a special lady all right. I can’t believe she just up and left,’ he added sadly. “I’m sure gonna miss her.”

Vader had to fight back the urge to choke the man where he stood and simply nodded in response. “Come, Luke and Leia,” he said, turning to his children. “I have a meeting to get to.”

Luke and Leia climbed into the speeder and waved to Mr. Wagar as Vader sped away.

“So that is the infamous Mr. Wagar,” Vader remarked as he directed the speeder homeward.

“He wanted to meet you, Dad,” Luke said. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s all right,” Vader replied. ‘It’s good to have a face to put with the name.’ “He’s kind of a duffus, isn’t he?” Leia asked.

Vader nodded. “Very much so,” he replied, causing the twins to giggle. “I’m glad your mother won’t be having any more dealings with that man,” he added.

“So is she,” Luke piped up.

Vader smiled under his mask as they sped towards home.

“Aren’t you coming in?” Leia asked when Vader remained in the speeder once they’d reached home.

“No,” Vader told her. “I have a meeting to attend.”

“When will you be home?” Luke asked.

“Not until very late,” Vader replied. At first he’d been annoyed by constantly having to account for his whereabouts to his children; but he’d soon come to realize that it was part of their own insecurities, and a demonstration of their love for him. So now he simply accepted it, and was patient with their questions.

“Have a good meeting, Dad,” Leia said, as she gave her father a kiss on the mask, another simple yet strange ritual it had taken Vader some time to get used to.

“That is highly unlikely, young one,” Vader remarked. “But thank you anyway.”

Leia and Luke waved him off and then headed for the lift, eager to see their mother and tell her all the news of the day. Upon reaching the third level, the twins ran off of the lift and straight to their mother’s room. However, she wasn’t there. Confused, they looked at one another, as though in silent communication, and then realized where she was. Leaving her room, they headed down the corridor for their own room. They were about to start telling their mother all about their day at school when the sight that met their eyes stopped them cold.

The common room between the two bedrooms had been decorated so that it was festooned with streamers and balloons. In the center of the room, on one of the desks, was a large birthday cake. And on the floor, seemingly covering it, were presents. More presents than either of them had ever seen in one place at one time. And standing to the side of the room was their mother, who was no doubt responsible for all of this.

“Mom!” Leia said, her eyes still taking in all the presents, “what’s all this?”

“What does it look like?” Padmé asked.

“It looks like the mother of all birthday parties,” Luke quipped.

Padmé smiled. “Well, I suppose it is,” she replied.

The twins looked up at her. “But it’s not our birthday,” Leia countered. “It was weeks and weeks ago.”

Padmé nodded. “I know that,” she said, walking towards them. ‘But I have missed the first ten years of your life,’ she told them. “And your first ten birthdays,” she added, putting an arm around each of them. “This is to make up for all those missed birthdays,” she continued. “In a small way. I can never make them up completely, but I wanted to do something.”

Luke and Leia were stunned by their mother’s gesture, and didn’t know what to say. So instead of saying anything, they both embraced her tightly, surrounding her in a giant warm

hug. Padmé hugged them back, her emotions once more filling her. “Go ahead,” she said. “I’m sure you’re both eager to see what’s in all those packages.”

“Oh yeah,” Luke said. “You can say that again!”

Padmé laughed, and went to sit down on one of the chairs as the twins set to work opening their gifts.

It was very late that night when Vader returned to his home. The meeting had dragged on far longer than he’d anticipated, and had left him in a most foul mood.

It was quiet when he stepped off the lift; no doubt the twins were already sleeping. Reaching out his mind to theirs, he saw that he was right. He walked down the corridor to their room to watch them sleep, as was his custom each night. Somehow he felt incomplete until he had done so.

Luke’s room was the first he entered, and he was surprised by how tidy it was. *Surely this wasn’t the boy’s doing*, he mused, knowing his son well enough to realize that he was as messy as he’d once been. *Threepio must have been busy today*. Vader walked over to his son’s bedside and watched him sleep, brushing his hair lightly as he did so. The love he felt for his children was almost frightening in its intensity, for he knew that he would do anything to protect them. Anything.

Next he entered Leia’s room, and walked over to her bedside. Her long braids were splayed out on the pillow beside her as she slept. Vader touched her face lightly, making her turn on her side. He left the room then and headed for his own room.

Padmé’s room was down the corridor from the twins’, but he knew that he could not presume to enter it uninvited. Vader clenched his fists when he thought about Len Wagar. Surely nothing had gone on between them, he reasoned. Surely she wasn’t attracted to him. But he was young, and fit and whole... a woman such as Padmé needed a man in her life. She was so sensual, so passionate... *and I’m human wreckage*, he thought in frustration. He stood outside her doorway for a moment, to determine if she too was asleep. She was, and so he went on his way, feeling strangely alone in the large house.

I arrive at the private landing platform outside of Padmé’s apartment a short time later. The lights are on, she is still up. This brings an odd sense of relief, as I realize that my dream was nothing more than that, nothing more than the misery of missing her wreaking havoc with my imagination.

I know I am being reckless by showing up like this; for although her hand maidens know of our marriage, no one else does. I can only hope that there is no one here with her who might grow suspicious if they see me suddenly walk in. Padmé will be upset with me if this is the case. I don’t care about that now... I need to see my wife, and I don’t give a damn about the risks anymore.

Walking into the apartment, I hear Padmé’s voice in the other room. She is not alone. I stand and wait for her to appear, and she does within short order. And with her is the man I saw on the holonet, the man who kissed her.

“Anakin!!” Padmé exclaims upon seeing me.

"Hello senator," I reply, my rage impossible to hide. "I'm sorry to show up like this, I didn't realize you had company."

Padmé can see how angry I am, she'd be blind not to. But before she can say anything in response, a third person enters the room. This one I recognize; Padmé's sister, Sola.

"Oh, hello Anakin," she says, giving Padmé a significant look. "Imagine running into you here."

I look from Sola back to Padmé, thoroughly confused now.

"Hello Sola," I reply. "I'm rather surprised to see you as well."

"Sola and her husband, Darred, have been here on Coruscant for the past week," Padmé explains. "It was their 10th wedding anniversary, and decided to take a trip to celebrate."

"Congratulations," I say, feeling the relief spilling out of me.

"Thanks," Darred replies. He is regarding me with suspicion, ironically enough, and no doubt wonders why I have access to Padmé's apartment.

"Anakin has been my protector for over a year now," Padmé explains. "He checks in on me from time to time, don't you Anakin?"

"That's right," I reply, feeling guilty now for having put Padmé in this awkward position. "Whenever I'm on Coruscant, I try to stop by to make sure your sister is still maintaining her security measures."

Sola nods. "Yes, I know how stubborn my little sister can be," she replies, smiling at Padmé. "I'm glad you keep her on her toes, Anakin."

"No need to thank me, Sola," I reply.

"Well we should be going, Sola," Darred replies. 'It's getting late. Thank you again for dinner, Padmé,' he says, kissing her cheek lightly. "And thank Rabé as well. She out did herself."

"You're very welcome," Padmé replies, hugging her sister and brother-in-law. "I'll walk you out."

"Nice to meet you, Anakin," Darred says, extending his hand to me.

"Same here," I reply, shaking my brother-in-law's hand.

"Goodbye Anakin," Sola says, smiling at me. "It was nice seeing you again. Thank you for watching out for my sister."

I smile at her. "You're very welcome, Sola. It was great seeing you again too."

I stand in the great room as Padmé walks the two of them out. I feel like an idiot now; but how was I to know?? I have never laid eyes on Sola's husband before; how was I to know? Still, I cannot help but feel guilty for ever having doubted my wife. She would no more cheat on me than I would on her.

"It's wonderful to see you, Anakin."

I look up to see my wife enter the room. She is looking at me strangely, as though she knows what was going through my mind. She has always been able to read me.

"I'm sorry I came in like that, Padmé," I begin. "I didn't know you would have company."

"It's alright," she replies, walking over to me. "You seemed rather upset when you first arrived. Is something wrong?"

I shake my head. "Not now," I say, pulling her into my arms.

She is not so easily put off. "I don't believe that," she replies. "When you came in that door you looked furious, Anakin. You were looking at Darred like you wanted to kill him. Don't tell me you're jealous of my brother-in-law."

"I didn't know he was your brother-in-law until you told me, Padmé," I reply. "I guess I was a little jealous."

Padmé lifts one eyebrow. "A little?" she responds. "A bit more than that, I'd say. What did you think, Anakin? That I had a gentleman caller here?"

I sigh, knowing I was not going to get out of this too easily. "No, of course not," I reply. "I saw you and Darred on the holonews the other night, and I had no idea who he was. I saw him kiss you, Padmé. How would you expect me to react?"

"I would expect you to trust me, Anakin," she replies, her body tensing in my arms.

"Of course I trust you," I reply, running my hands over her back. "Surely you know that."

"Then why were you so quick to jump to conclusions when you saw me with Darred?" she asks.

I have no answer for her, no answer that will make this mess any better.

"I... I didn't jump to conclusions, Padmé," I tell her. "I am just so crazy without you, so miserable not being with you, that when I saw you with him it made me insane with jealousy. Not because I thought you would ever do anything with him, with anyone; but because he was with you instead of me. He was able to be seen in public with you, he even kissed you! I can never do that, and it kills me to realize that. I'm sorry if that makes me a jerk, Padmé, but I'm so wild about you that it sometimes makes me insane. Does any of that make sense?"

Padmé looks up at me, her eyes softening as I pour out my heart to her.

"Yes Ani, it makes sense," she replies, relaxing into my arms once again. She brings her hands up to my face and runs her fingers into my hair. "I'm sorry you were made to feel that way. You know that you are the only man I will ever love, the only man who makes me feel alive."

I nod, the proximity of our bodies driving me wild. I run my hands up and down her back, pressing her body against mine. Pulling her face to mine, I kiss her, weeks of frustrating, forced abstinence having taken their toll on me. I run my hands into her hair as my mouth claims hers. Yes, Padmé, I am the only man who can make you feel this way... you are mine, Padmé, and mine alone...

Vader awoke at this point, his body afire with unfulfilled longing. In the past ten years he'd learned to master the feelings of physical need that had been such a huge part of his relationship with his wife. He'd learned to sublimate them, to use them to his advantage. Lust was a dark emotion, and he'd used it, on the rare occasion when he'd experienced it, to drive himself deeper into the darkness. But now, things were different. This time it wasn't just a memory of her that had created the fire in his veins; Padmé was here, she was alive, and she was sleeping mere meters from where he sat right now, frustrated with unquenchable desire for her. Self-loathing and bitterness filled him as he fought against the waves of lust that crashed over him; she would never accept him now, even if she knew that, in at least one respect, he was still fully human. No, in her eyes he was a monster, a murderer and a cyborg, not a man; although at this moment he was reminded in no uncertain terms that he was indeed very much a man. Vader pressed his hands to his eyes, as though to squeeze the images from his dream from his mind. How many other occasions had he done the same over the past ten years, when memories of her haunted him in his sleep, when desire for her raged through his body like the wild fires of Mustafar. *I must get away from here, he thought desperately; I have to put some distance between us until I can learn to master this...*

With this thought in mind, Vader donned his mask and helmet and left his quarters, deciding that some time spent in the gym would help him work through the frustration he was feeling.

The next morning

Luke and Leia joined their mother for breakfast early the next day, each of them wearing one of the new outfits she'd bought for them. Padmé was pleased that they'd liked her choices.

"Where's Dad this morning?" Luke asked.

"I haven't seen him," Padmé replied. It was clear that the boy idolized his father, for each time they were together Luke's eyes shone with hero worship.

"Did he go shopping with you yesterday?" Leia asked. "I know how much he hates shopping."

"No, Captain Kassel came with me," Padmé told her. "Your father was at meetings all day."

"He goes to a lot of those," Luke observed.

Padmé nodded, all the while reflecting that 'meeting' was no doubt often a euphemism for something far more sinister. "Well, he's an important man in the Empire," she said. "It's natural that he would."

"I hate it when he goes away," Leia said.

"Yes, I know you do," Padmé said. "You told me so when I was your school councilor," she reminded her.

"Oh yeah," Leia said with a smile. 'It's kind of weird to think of you as Miss Kinsky now,' she said. "Mr. Wagar is broken hearted, by the way," she added.

"Oh please," Padmé said. "I barely knew him."

“That’s not what he says,” Luke piped up. “He’s telling everybody how you and him were a...what was the word we heard him use, Leia?”

“An item,” Leia said. ‘We overheard him talking to some of the teachers outside,’ she explained. “He’s saying that you and him were dating, Mom. Don’t you think he ought to be stopped?”

Padmé nodded. “Yes, but how do you propose we do that?” she asked. “Your father doesn’t want anyone to know who I am,” she added.

“I don’t know why,” Luke said. “After all, he’s so happy to have you back. You’d think he’d want to brag to everybody about it.”

Padmé smiled, not wanting to crush her son’s delusion. “Well, I guess he doesn’t see it that way,” she replied. ‘Now come on you two,’ she said, changing the subject. “It’s almost time to go.”

Luke and Leia said no more, but focused on their breakfast, determined not to be late for school, just this once.

“We’re leaving in ten minutes, kids,” Han Solo announced as he entered the room. ‘Got that kiddo?’ he said, looking at Luke. “Ten minutes.”

Luke smiled sheepishly. “Got it,” he said.

“Good morning, Han,” Padmé said.

Han looked at her, his face reddening slightly. “Uh, good morning, Milady,” he said. He rubbed the back of his neck nervously. ‘About the other day,’ he said, “that...remark I made,” he continued, his face growing redder by the minute.

“Forget it,” Padmé said. “I don’t want you to feel badly about that, Han. You didn’t know who I was.”

“No, and believe me, if I had...” he stopped, shaking his head. “I’m just glad Lord Vader was so good about it. He strikes me as kind of the jealous type.”

Padmé smiled. “Well that may have been true many years ago,” she said. “But now... I’m not so sure.”

Han was puzzled by her comment, but said nothing. “I’ll wait for you two downstairs,” he told the twins. “Don’t make me come up here and kick your... I mean don’t keep me waiting.”

Luke and Leia giggled at Han’s comment and looked at their mother, who seemed equally amused.

“Han’s a cool guy,” Luke said. “At first we tried to ditch him whenever we got the chance, but now we like him.”

“He grows on you,” Leia put in.

“Yes, I can tell,” Padmé said. ‘You heard what he said, though,’ she added. “Time to go brush your teeth or you’ll be late for sure.”

“Okay Mom,” the twins said in unison as they stood up.

“And Luke, try to keep the toothpaste off your shirt this time,” Padmé heard Leia say as they walked out the door. She smiled, as the serving droid entered the room.

“Is there anything else I can get you, Milady?” it asked.

“No, thank you,” she said, standing up. “Is Lord Vader still at home?” she asked.

“I don’t know, Milady,” the droid replied. “I can enquire if you wish.”

“No, that won’t be necessary,” Padmé said, deciding she’d seek him out herself. “I’ll find him myself.”

Chapter 37

Thirty-seven

There were places in her new home that Padmé was still unfamiliar with; places she figured were Vader's private quarters. She'd wondered how he slept, or how he ate, or performed any of the myriad of things necessary to human beings. *Does he ever take off that suit?* She wondered as she walked through the unfamiliar corridors, *or that mask? Surely he must...* The dream she'd had recently came to mind as she pondered this. In her dream Vader had assured her that he was still fully male under his suit. Was that true? *Why are you even thinking about that?* She admonished herself.

There had been many times, countless times, over the past ten years when she'd dreamed of the passion she'd shared with her beloved Anakin. Theirs was a deep, abiding love, one that had driven them to break all the rules in order to be together. *But he's not the same man he was*, she reminded herself. *He doesn't love you anymore, he doesn't want you anymore...* she told herself. *But if that's the case, why is he so adamant that I live here with him?* Anakin had always been very possessive of her; was that all it was? Did he simply see her as a possession now? As a trophy to be admired but nothing more?

"Are you lost?"

Padmé's musings were interrupted by the sudden appearance of her husband.

"No," she said, taking a step back. "Well, maybe," she conceded.

Vader couldn't stop the images from his dream from flooding into his mind as he looked at her, and simply said nothing for a moment, waiting for her to explain herself.

"I was hoping we could talk," she said finally.

Vader was surprised by her request, and nodded. "Have the children left for school?" he asked.

"Yes, Han was taking them when I came looking for you," she said, finally admitting her reason for being here. Once again, Vader was surprised.

"Then perhaps now is a good time," he said. "Come with me."

"What's down here?" she asked, looking down the hallway.

"This is where I come to work out," he told her, "and where I've instructed the workmen to commence building the pool," he added.

"I see," she said as he led her around. The entire floor seemed dedicated to fitness and recreation, as she noticed. "I had no idea this place was so extensive," she commented.

He glanced at her briefly. "The upper floor is dedicated solely to living space," he told her. "The officers and men who work within the complex occupy the floor beneath this one," he added. "And this one is simply for..."

“Fun?” she asked.

He turned to her as they reached the lift. “I suppose you could call it that,” he replied. “Luke has certainly come to enjoy himself in the workshop down here.”

“I’m sure,” she replied as the lift doors opened. “Where is your... I mean, where do you... do you sleep? I mean, can you? Do you?”

“I sleep very little,” he told her as the lift carried them upwards. “But I must do so in a specialized environment, one which allows me to remove this,” he said, indicating his mask.

“I wasn’t sure that was possible,” she admitted.

“It is,” he assured her as the lift stopped. “But only for short periods of time.”

Padmé nodded, wanting to ask him more, but sensing that he was uneasy telling her even this much. “I’m sorry,” she said finally, not sure what else to say.

Vader looked at her, sensing her sincerity, sensing her pity. “It was not your doing,” he told her.

Just then the lift doors opened and Vader stepped out, Padmé walking alongside him. They walked in silence until they reached the large living room across from Vader’s office, where they both sat down, neither saying anything for a moment.

“You wanted to talk,” he reminded her.

“Yes,” she said, gathering her thoughts once more, trying to remember what it was she wanted to talk about. Vader could sense her uneasiness, and wished there was something he could say or do to make his presence less foreboding. But there wasn’t; and so he simply waited for her to say what was on her mind.

“The children were happy with their gifts,” she told him at last.

“I’m sure,” he replied. “You’ll spoil them, I just know it,” he added, his words meant to tease not to accuse.

Padmé sensed this and smiled. “Yes, I’m sure I will,” she said. ‘I’ve seen their rooms,’ she reminded him. “I think you’ve already had a jump on that,” she told him.

“Yes, perhaps so,” he conceded. He relaxed a little, realizing that this was the first cordial conversation he’d had with his wife since he’d found her.

“I’m...concerned,” she said, coming to the point at last. “I need to know what your intentions are.”

“My intentions?”

“Yes,” she replied. “With regards to Palpatine.”

Vader remained silent for a few moments upon hearing this, the hatred he felt for his master filling him. “You’re afraid of what will happen to Luke and Leia,” he said.

“Yes, very much so,” she replied at once. “I assume he knows about them.”

Vader nodded. “It was unavoidable,” he replied.

“So what did you tell him?” she asked, almost afraid to hear his response.

“I told him that I’d found them,” he told her. “That they were alive and that I wanted them to live with me.”

Padmé nodded. “And how did he respond to this?”

“He was not happy,” he told her. “He is fearful of them, fearful of the power they possess. I told him they had no power, that they had not inherited my Force abilities.”

“And you think he believed that?” she asked.

“No, perhaps at first, but he’s too clever to fool for long,” he replied. ‘Just before I found you he demanded that I have a medichlorian test done on them,’ he told her. “And sent a lackey here to ensure that I did it.”

Padmé grew alarmed. “What are you going to do?” she asked anxiously. “If he knows how strong they are, he’ll take them from us! Surely you know that!”

“Yes I know,” he assured her. ‘The lackey is no longer a problem,’ he told her. “I killed him on the trip back from the Death Star.”

“Oh,” Padmé said, relieved and sickened to hear it. ‘But Palpatine won’t be satisfied until he gets the test results,’ she reminded him. “You can’t stall him forever.”

“I realize that,” he said. “Believe me, Padmé, I know him well.”

She was silent for a moment, afraid to ask him what she felt compelled to. “Please tell me you’re not planning on handing our precious children over to that monster,” she said quietly. “Please tell me you won’t let him destroy them the way he destroyed us.”

Vader sensed how terrified Padmé was, and was overwhelmed with a sense of protectiveness. “No,” he told her at last. “I won’t.”

Padmé almost wept with relief upon hearing this. “Thank the Maker,” she sighed. “But how will you keep them from him? How will you keep the truth from him?”

Vader stood up and commenced pacing about the room. “By whatever means necessary,” he said.

Padmé was surprised to hear him say this, and wanted to make sure she hadn’t misunderstood. “You mean... you’ll kill him? Is that what you’re saying?”

Vader turned to her, the nagging pain he’d felt in his right shoulder since he’d awoken jarring him as he did. “I mean I’ll do anything,” he told her. ‘Luke and Leia are more important than anything,’ he added. “I will do what I must to protect them.”

Padmé nodded, her throat constricting with emotion. “Thank you,” she said quietly.

Vader looked at her, feeling his heart wrench by the power of the emotions he felt emanating from her. He wanted to say so much, and was on the verge of doing so when another twinge of pain in his shoulder stopped him. Padmé frowned. “Is something wrong?” she asked.

"I didn't sleep much last night," he told her, not daring to tell her of the erotic dream he'd had of her. "Sometimes this shoulder bothers me when I'm overtired."

"The same one that used to bother you before?" she asked.

Vader nodded. "Yes," he said. "I'm surprised you remember."

"I ought to," she said, "I spent many an hour massaging that shoulder if you'll recall."

"I do," he said.

An awkward silence ensued, as Padmé wrestled with indecision. *Should I offer to massage it now? she wondered. Is there any way that I can? Or will my suggestion only embarrass and anger him?*

Vader read her thoughts easily, surprised by her reticence, which was not like her at all. And yet, part of him was embarrassed, for although his shoulders were still as she knew them, the skin was marred with vicious scar tissue from the burns he'd suffered on Mustafar.

"I need to get to a meeting," he told her finally, deciding to put an end to the awkward moment. "Is there something you require before I go?" he asked, assuming a more formal tone with her.

She looked up at him. "No," she said. "Do you know when you'll be back?"

"No," he replied. "I seldom do." He remembered something, and walked out of the room and into his office across the way. Padmé stood up and waited for him to return. He did momentarily.

"A comlink," he told her, handing the device to her. "It is set to my personal frequency," he added.

Padmé took it from him. "Thank you," she said. She looked at the device. "So... how are you going to explain it if I have to contact you?" she asked.

"I'll think of something," he assured her. "You're right; we can't keep this a secret forever."

Padmé shook her head. "Sort of the story of our lives isn't it?" she remarked. "Keeping secrets."

Vader nodded. "Indeed," he replied. Another moment of silence. 'I have to go,' he said. "Have a good day."

"Thanks," she said as he walked away. "You too."

Vader stopped and looked back at her one more time before turning and leaving completely.

Padmé watched him as he left, a feeling of melancholy coming over her as she did so. *Are you in there, Ani?* She wondered sadly. *Is there any part of you left at all?* Three days ago she was certain she knew the answer to this; but now, she wasn't sure at all. And that, more than anything, gave her reason to hope.

Star Destroyer Exactor

“Lord Vader, the emperor is waiting for you,” Lieutenant Ozzel informed him as Vader strode on board the *Exactor*.

“The emperor?” he said, alarmed to hear it. “The emperor is here??”

“No, not physically, sir,” Ozzel replied. “But he is waiting to speak to you in your holochamber.”

Vader didn’t wait for any further explanation and left the bridge at once. There was no doubt in his mind why the emperor was after him; he’d heard about the death of his lackey. And while Kassel’s explanation was a good one, it didn’t eliminate the reason why Palpatine had sent Vansic Jokar in the first place. *Perhaps some distraction is in order*, he mused as he reached the holochamber, and then locked his mental shields firmly in place to face the emperor.

“Lord Vader,” Palpatine said as Vader knelt before his image. “I’ve been waiting.”

“Forgive me, Master,” Vader replied. “I was not aware that you were...”

“I tried to contact you at your home,” Palpatine interjected, “but was unable to reach you. No doubt you were busy playing daddy to your brats,” he snarled.

“No, I was not,” he replied. “Luke and Leia are at school.”

Palpatine frowned, not liking the way Vader had responded so matter-of-factly. “You seem quite comfortable in your new role, Vader,” he stated.

“I am,” Vader replied. ‘In fact,’ he continued, deciding to lure Palpatine’s attention away from the twins, “there has been a rather unexpected development recently.”

Palpatine frowned; annoyed that he was unaware of any such development. “Oh?” he asked. “And what is that?”

“I have learned that the twins’ mother is alive, Master,” Vader said, fighting to keep the animosity from his voice. “Padmé, my wife, is alive.”

Chapter 38

Thirty-eight

Palpatine was silent for a long time, far longer than Vader liked.

“Indeed?” Palpatine replied, doing his best to feign surprise. “What an unexpected turn of events! How did you find her?” Palpatine asked.

“She came to Coruscant when she learned that the twins were with me,” Vader told him. “She has spent the past ten years believing they were dead, just as I did.”

“How... tragic,” Palpatine commented sourly. “And now what? Is your beloved wife now living in your house? Sharing your bed?” he added sarcastically at the end.

“She is living in my home,” Vader replied, ignoring his master’s dig. “She is with our children, as she should be.”

Palpatine nodded, his expression growing sourer by the minute. “Yes, all is as it should be,” he remarked. “One big happy family,” he added disdainfully.

“Not quite,” Vader said, knowing he needed damage control and needed it fast. ‘My wife despises and resents me,’ he said. “She has only agreed to live under my roof in order to be close to our children.”

Palpatine smiled. “Pity, that,” he said. “I suppose trying to kill her didn’t sit well with her,” he added.

“No,” Vader replied, swallowing his anger. “She is very bitter.”

“Ah, women,” Palpatine sighed with a shake of his head. “After all you did to save her,” he added, deciding he liked this situation. Vader’s wife had always been an open wound with him, his proverbial Achilles heel. But now that she was in his life, and hated him, things would change. The romantic longing that Vader had never managed to get past where Padmé was concerned would morph into angry frustration when she rejected him, when his own inability to function as a man struck him right between the eyes day after day. Seeing her, wanting her, and not being able to have her would only serve to drive Vader deeper into the Darkness. And that pleased Palpatine very much indeed.

“I would very much like to see Senator Amidala again,” Palpatine said at last, much to Vader’s shock and dismay. ‘I shall have a formal dinner arranged,’ he said. “Your lovely wife must be bored of sitting around your house with no one to entertain her but two ten year old children.”

“There is no need, Master,” Vader tried to insist. “Really, it is too much trouble.”

“No trouble at all,” Palpatine replied with a smile. ‘I am looking forward to it very much. You will be able to deliver the test results to me as well,’ he added. “Since Jokar met with such an unfortunate end.”

Vader nodded. "Of course, Master," he replied.

"Excellent," Palpatine replied. 'I will let you get to your meeting now, Vader,' he said. "My office will inform you of the time and place for the soiree," he told him.

"Yes, my master," Vader replied. "I look forward to it."

Palpatine smiled. "As do I," he replied, and then ended the transmission.

Once the image of the emperor had disappeared, Vader rose to his feet, monumental anger filling him. He knew exactly why Palpatine had suggested the party and it had nothing to do with his desire to see Padmé. It was a test, pure and simple. And Vader knew that this test was critical to the future of his family.

Deciding that this was going to be a monumentally rotten day, Vader headed for the conference room, his mood as dark as the armor he wore.

Vader residence

Padmé had finished tidying the twins rooms, ignoring Threepio's protests, and it wasn't quite midday yet. She was starting to grow bored and restless in the enormous estate with nothing to do and no one, save droids, to talk to. Deciding to take advantage of the facilities on the second level, Padmé changed into exercise attire and headed down to the gym to work out.

The gymnasium was enormous, and featured a lot of equipment that Padmé didn't even recognize. She wondered idly as she began her work out how Vader used them. Did he? Or was this facility here for the officers' use? She really had no idea of the extent of his injuries, and knew that she couldn't dare ask him. There was still a lot of tension between them, even though they were now starting to be at least civil with one another. *Perhaps the twins know*, she thought. *Perhaps he's told them more than he'll tell me*. All she knew at this point was that Vader needed to sleep in a specialized environment. What did that mean, exactly? Had his lungs been so badly compromised that taking his mask off outside of this environment was dangerous to him? Had the twins seen him without his mask yet? All these questions ran through her mind as she went through a slightly modified version of the work out she'd been doing for years. It felt good to work out, for exercise had always been one of Padmé's favorite ways to unwind. *A swim would be simply heavenly right now*, she mused, wondering how soon the pool would be ready. Knowing Vader, the workmen were working at top speed, she realized.

Leaving the gym, Padmé headed down the corridor to where the pool was being installed. A few men and many droids were there, working diligently, and things seemed to be nearing completion. Padmé was pleased by this, and watched for a few minutes.

"Can I help you, Milady?" the foreman of the crew asked.

"No, thank you," Padmé replied. 'I was just curious to see how things were coming along,' she replied. "Do you have any idea when the pool will be ready for use?"

"We're aiming for sometime late tomorrow," the man replied. "Lord Vader made it pretty clear that he wanted it finished soon."

"I'm sure he was quite emphatic," she agreed.

“Yeah, you could say so,” the man replied. “The man I replaced learned that the hard way.”

Padmé frowned. “I beg your pardon?” she asked.

“I wasn’t always the foreman, M’am,” he said. ‘But I took on the job after Lord Vader killed the first one,’ he told her. “I guess he didn’t agree with the man’s plans,” he said.

Padmé felt sickened by this and it must have shown on her face.

“Forgive me, Milady,” the man said, suddenly fearful. ‘I shouldn’t have said anything. I hope you... please don’t say anything to Lord Vader,’ he pleaded. “I’ve got five kids at home, and...”

“I won’t say anything, I promise you,” Padmé replied, feeling compassion for the man. “Did the man who died have a family?” she asked.

“Yes,” the foreman replied. “Two kids with a third one on the way,” he told her.

“Oh no,” she said. ‘That’s terrible!’ She considered for a moment. “I’d like you to do something for me Mr... what is your name?”

“Genikins, Ma’m,” the man replied, astonished that she’d want to know his name.

“I want you to find out where the widow of this man lives,” she said.

Genikins frowned. “Okay, I can do that,” he said, rubbing his grizzled chin. “Can I ask why you want it?”

“I want to provide some compensation for this woman,” she said. “It can’t be easy for her now that her husband is gone.”

“No, I’m sure it isn’t,” Genikins replied. He hesitated for a moment before speaking again. ‘You’re a kind lady, m’am,’ he said finally. *How did you end up with that monster you’re married to?* He thought, hoping the Lady Vader didn’t share her husband’s unnerving ability to read minds. “I’ll get that address for you as soon as possible. And we’ll have this pool ready for you by sundown tomorrow, you have my personal guarantee.”

Padmé smiled. “Thank you Mr. Genikins,” she replied. “My children will be thrilled.”

Genikins smiled in response, utterly charmed by Lord Vader’s wife. He watched her leave, and then turned back to his crew, determined to get the job done if for no other reason than to please her.

Padmé returned to the main level to have a shower, still disturbed by what she had learned. *He kills without a second thought*, she reflected grimly, remembering how Vader had told her how he’d killed the emperor’s agent. *There is so much evil in him, so much anger and darkness... is there anything left of the man I married?*

Star Destroyer Exactor

“I believe that I’ve made myself clear,” Vader growled as the bodies of not one but two officials were hauled out of the conference room.

His statement was met with terror filled silence, as the remaining members of the committee swallowed their rage over what they had just witnessed. It seemed that Lord Vader

was in a particularly foul mood today, and there wasn't a being present who didn't know what that meant.

"The Rebel Alliance does not understand anything but destruction," Vader went on. "The sabotage in our shipyards is proof of that. I want the names of every individual who was on sentry duty during time when the explosives were set," he continued. "Every name, do you hear me?"

"Yes, Lord Vader," the man next to him replied. "We'll get right on that."

"I want to know who is leaking secure information to them," Vader went on. "There has to be a leak, that faculty is simply too secure to enable a breach of this magnitude."

"Lord Vader, there are rumors of a growing number of Imperial senators who have affiliations with known Rebel sympathizers," another man spoke up. "Perhaps that might be a good place to start."

Vader nodded, knowing full well that there had always been Rebel sympathizers within the senate; his own wife had begun the movement ten years earlier. *She'll know who is responsible*, he thought with a smile. *Surely she of all people will know*. "I know a way to find out who they are," he said finally. "I will have the names by the week's end."

Vader residence

After her shower, Padmé realized that she still had some time left before the twins got home, and so she decided to go exploring. She had not been able to stop thinking about what Vader had told her about how he needed to sleep in a special environment. What could that be? She wondered. She was determined to find out, if for no other reason than to try and better understand the man she was married to.

Standing outside of the room that Vader had pointed out as being his quarters, Padmé hesitated. Was this an invasion of his privacy? Surely not; he was her husband, after all. She meant no harm, she reminded herself. All she wanted was to know him better, for she felt right now as though he was little more than a stranger to her.

Activating the door, it opened at once, which surprised her, for she half expected them to be under a security lock. She entered the room, which was dimly lit and quite large. A feeling of uneasiness came over Padmé as she walked further into the room, for it was stark and cold and devoid of any color at all. *Is this how he sees life now?* she wondered as she walked slowly through the enormous room. *Is this what his life has been since he became the man he is now?*

Padmé stopped when she reached a large, spherical pod. It seemed to be a very sophisticated device, one which Padmé had never seen before. Curiosity got the better of her, and she stood to examine it closer. She noticed an activator which she assumed opened the huge sphere, and, without a moment's hesitation, activated it. At once the orb split in two, the top hemisphere lifting away with a rather loud screeching sound. Padmé took a step back in alarm, and then stopped to watch as the contents of the pod came into view.

Complicated circuitry covered the curved walls of the inside of the pod, with a small holoscreen taking up a large portion of one section. In the centre was a leather chair; above it was a large claw like appendage. Padmé stood and looked around, trying to determine what it

was that she was looking at, and then it came to her. *This is where he must sleep*, she thought; *this is the only place he can remove his mask and helmet...* “Oh, Anakin,” she murmured softly, a strong wave of compassion flooding her.

“Mom?”

Padmé whirled around to see her twins standing in the doorway. She hastily brushed away tears she hadn’t realized she’d shed as they walked towards her.

“What are you doing in here?” Leia asked.

“I... I just wanted to see where your father sleeps,” she told them, turning back to the pod. “I had no idea...”

“Dad showed us this only a few days ago,” Luke told her, stepping up to stand beside his mother. “Pretty cool, eh?”

“Cool?” Padmé said with a frown. “I don’t know if that’s the word I’d use, Luke,” she said.

Luke looked up at her, sensing how upset she was seeing the way Vader had to exist. “At least he can take his mask off in here,” he offered.

Padmé nodded. “Yes, I suppose so,” she replied. “Has he ever allowed you to see him unmasked?” she asked them.

“No,” Leia said at once. “I think he’s...embarrassed,” she said.

“Yes, I’m sure,” Padmé agreed. She sighed, and then closed the pod. ‘Come on,’ she said. “Let’s go. Tell me all about your day at school,” she said, turning back to the twins as the pod closed behind them.

“We found out there’s going to be an open house at school this week,” Leia told her. “Luke has the note somewhere,” she added, looking askance at her brother’s rather bulging haversack.

“I told Miss Zadane that I’m older than Leia,” Luke told his mother with a grin. “So now I get *all* the notes,” he added. Leia rolled her eyes, once again wishing she’d never asked about their birth order.

Padmé smiled. “Let’s have a look at this note,” she said.

“It will take Luke an hour at least to find it,” Leia quipped.

Luke stuck his tongue out as he patted his haversack. “You’re just jealous because *I* got the note.”

“Mom!” Leia complained as they reached the living room.

“Luke, stop bragging,” Padmé said. “Now find this note,” she said as they sat down.

Luke plopped his bag down on the floor before him and opened it up. Padmé and Leia watched as he dug through it, sending an assortment of items falling onto the floor. Leia looked up at her mother with an expression of exasperation on her face. Padmé merely smiled and waited for Luke to find the note, which he did after a few moments of routing around.

“Here it is,” he said, handing his mother an old fashioned piece of stationary that was meant to resemble an invitation. It was a little worse for wear, and was stained with what looked like sauce of some sort in one corner, but otherwise legible.

“Thank you,” Padmé said, taking the note from her son. She opened it up and read:

The faculty of Veslack Academy cordially invites you to an Open House. Meet your child's teachers, tour the facility and have some refreshments at 1700-1900 on Day Five of this week's cycle. We look forward to seeing you there!

“Well, this does present something of a problem,” she said when she'd read the note.

“Yeah, I know,” Luke said. “Dad won't want you to go.”

Padmé sighed. “Yes, you're right,” she replied. ‘I guess he'll have to go alone,’ she said. “We'll have to talk to him about it when he gets home.”

Luke and Leia looked at each other as they sensed their father's presence nearby. “He's home now,” Leia said. She frowned. “And he's not happy,” she added.

“I guess the meeting didn't go very well,” Padmé said, looking up as they waited for Vader to appear. He did in a few moments, bristling with anger as he strode into his office without as much as saying hello to his family. Padmé looked back at the twins, who looked as alarmed as she was. “Stay here,” she said, and stood up. Luke and Leia leaned forward, trying to hear what was bound to be an intense conversation.

“Bad day?”

Vader looked up from the computer on his desk to his wife. “Yes,” he said simply. “Very bad.”

Padmé frowned. “Do I want to know what happened?” she asked, sitting down in a chair before his desk.

“I'm afraid you must know,” he told her. “The emperor knows you're alive.”

Padmé looked at him with wide eyes. “What!?” she cried. “How? How did he find out?”

“I told him,” Vader told her. “I had no choice,” he added.

Padmé remained silent, not doubting for a moment that he was telling her the truth. “How did he react?” she asked.

“He had the audacity to act surprised,” Vader said, standing suddenly and striding over to the window. He folded his arms over his chest and stared outside. “He...wants to see you. To see us together. He's planning a social affair and we are to be there.”

The thought of seeing Palpatine again after all that had happened, all the horror he'd brought to their lives filled Padmé with a potent mixture of fear and hatred. “Why?” she demanded, standing up and walking over to him. “What is his real reason for this... party?”

Vader turned to her. “It's a test, Padmé,” he told her. “Everything he does is a test. He wants to see us together to ensure that what I told him about our relationship is true.”

Padmé was almost afraid to know what he'd told Palpatine. "What did you tell him?" she asked.

"I told him what I know he wants to hear," Vader replied. "As always."

"And what is that?"

"That you hate me," Vader replied. "That you want nothing to do with me, and that you're only here so that you can be with Luke and Leia."

Padmé nodded, knowing that Palpatine would relish knowing that Vader was living under such conditions. "And he liked hearing that did he?"

"Yes," he told her. 'Nothing gives him greater joy than my pain, Padmé,' he told her bitterly. "Be it physical, emotional or psychological, he takes great enjoyment out of my suffering."

Padmé shook her head, feeling more hatred than she'd ever felt for anyone in her life. "How can you continue to serve him?" she asked. "After everything he's done?"

"At present I have no choice," Vader replied. "But rest assured, he will not be my master for much longer, Padmé. But until then, I must play the game. This is an important test, and we need to pass it."

"Just tell me what to do," she said. "I'll do whatever you need of me," she added.

Vader looked at her, once again reminded of just how courageous and strong she was. He was about to reply when the twins entered the room.

"Hi dad!" Luke said as he and Leia entered the room.

Vader turned to the twins. "Hello," he said. "How was school today?"

"Our teacher gave us this," Luke said as he handed Vader the invitation. Vader took it and read it over briefly before looking up at Padmé.

"Is this... customary?" he asked.

"I suppose so," she replied. "I suppose now that the emperor knows we don't have to keep my identity a secret anymore," she commented.

"No, I don't suppose we do," Vader agreed.

"Does that mean Mom can come?" Leia asked hopefully.

"I don't see why not," Vader replied. The thought of confronting Wagar with Padmé on his arm went a long way to help improve his mood. "It should be an interesting evening," he added.

Chapter 39

Thirty-nine

Security was tightened on the day of the open house, and each person in attendance had been cross referenced thoroughly, no one gaining entry without an invitation and a security code. Of course, such security measures were waived when Lord Vader arrived with his children.

“Who was that woman with Vader?” the security guard asked as Vader and his family passed the security gates.

“I don’t know,” the other replied. “I couldn’t really see her face with that hood on,” he added.

The first man looked back, to where the petite, white clad figure was entering the school at the side of the infamous dark lord, Vader’s children running ahead. “You don’t suppose...” he said. And then he thought better of it. ‘Nah,’ he said. “Couldn’t be.”

Vader, Padmé and the twins proceeded to Miss Zadane’s classroom. Padmé recognized many of the children she saw along the way, but since she still had the hood of her cloak up none of them knew who she was. However, simply the fact that there was a woman in the company of Darth Vader was enough to garner her more than a few curious looks.

Miss Zadane was engaged in a conversation with another couple when they entered the classroom, and at once Luke and Leia lead their parents to where they sat. Neither Padmé nor Vader were surprised to see that Leia’s desk was impeccably organized and tidy, while Luke’s was a hodgepodge of disorganization.

“Luke, you really do need to make a great effort to organize yourself,” Vader commented. “Believe me; it makes life a lot easier.”

“I know,” Luke replied. “I just start so many things at once that I don’t have a place for everything.”

“Now who does that remind me of?” Padmé commented with a smile, looking up at Vader. He was about to offer a retort when he was interrupted by the twin’s teacher.

“Lord Vader!” Miss Zadane said as she approached them. ‘I’m so glad you were able to make it!’ She turned to the woman at his side, trying to see her face under the hood. “I... don’t believe we’ve met,” she said, doing her best not to be too obvious.

Padmé lowered her hood at this point. “Yes, we have,” she said. “Hello Lucia,” she said with a smile.

Miss Zadane looked closely at Padmé, not recognizing her at once with the change of hair color and eyes. “Ania?” she said. “Ania Kinsky?”

Padmé smiled. “Yes, it’s me,” she said. ‘But my real name is Padmé,’ she said, turning to look up at Vader. “And I’m Lord Vader’s wife.”

Miss Zadane stared at Padmé for a moment as though she hadn't heard her. "Excuse me?" she said. "You mean... you resigned from Veslack to get married? To Lord Vader??"

"No," Padmé explained. 'We've been married almost fourteen years,' she said, looking up at Vader. "We've just been... estranged for a long time, that's all."

"She's our mother, Miss Zadane," Leia explained, looking up at Padmé with obvious adoration. "It's kind of a long story."

"I should imagine so," she replied, unsure what to think of this extraordinary turn of events. "Well... I'm happy you're all together," she said finally.

"I believe we're here for a progress report," Vader pointed out, having had his fill of discussion about his personal life.

"Yes, yes of course," the teacher replied, suddenly flustered. "Come right this way." After hearing Miss Zadane tell them how brilliant and wonderful both their children were, Padmé and Vader followed the children around the rest of the school. Padmé was on the receiving end of many a double take, as word slowly spread through the facility that the teacher they had once known as Miss Kinsky was in fact the wife of Darth Vader and mother of his two children. No one of course dared to talk to her openly about it, not with her husband constantly at her side; but it wasn't long before there wasn't a student or a teacher who wasn't aware of the shocking development.

"So where is the buffoon," Vader said to the twins. "That jackass, Wagar?"

Luke and Leia giggled at their father's epithets of their physical education instructor. "He's probably in the rec wing," Luke said. "Come on, this way."

Padmé looked up at Vader. "Now, why do you want to meet this man?" she asked. "If you think he's a buffoon?"

Vader looked down at her. "Is there some reason you don't want me to meet him?" he asked.

Padmé frowned. "No, why should there be?" she asked.

"Then meeting him shouldn't pose a problem," he countered.

Padmé continued to frown, sensing that there was a rather unpleasant confrontation in the offing.

"Hey, Luke! Leia!" Wagar said when he saw the twins enter the gymnasium. "How's it going?" he said, holding out a hand to each of them. After the ritual 'high five', Wagar turned to the twins' parents, his eyes widening in shock when he saw the former object of his desire standing beside Vader.

"Lord Vader!" he said, his eyes shifting nervously back and forth between Vader and Padmé. "Good to see you again, sir."

"Wagar," Vader replied. He turned to Padmé, putting a hand possessively about her waist. "I believe you already know my wife," he said, relishing each syllable.

Although it hardly seemed possible, Wagar's eyes widened even more, until it seemed as though they would positively pop from their sockets. "You're... but you're... aren't you..?"

"Miss Kinsky," Leia put in. 'That was just the name she used when she worked here,' she explained. "Now that she and my Dad have found one another again..."

"Your unwanted and inappropriate attentions towards my wife will cease at once," Vader warned. "Or there will be dire consequences," he added, taking a step closer to the trembling teacher.

"Uh... yeah... of course, I mean, I didn't know," Wagar babbled, beads of sweat standing out on his brow. "Excuse me," he muttered as he ran off to the nearest fresher, but not before a dark stain had appeared on the front of his trousers.

Luke and Leia nearly had accidents themselves they laughed so hard, causing some of the other students and their parents, who hadn't witnessed Mr. Wagar's unfortunate seepage, to look at them oddly.

"That was rather mean," Padmé told Vader as they left the gym, the two giggling twins in tow.

"I beg to differ," Vader replied. "The man got off easy. If I'd had my way, he'd..."

"Please, don't finish the sentence," Padmé sighed, knowing exactly what he was going to say. 'Let's go home now,' she said. "I've had enough of Veslack Academy for one evening."

"I couldn't agree more," Vader said. "Let's go."

As Luke and Leia giggled all the way home, reliving the pivotal moment of the evening, Padmé sat in brooding silence, the incident with Wagar merely the final straw. Vader could sense how irritated she was, and his already healthy jealousy grew. He held his tongue, however, not wanting to get into a discussion that was bound to get ugly in front of the children.

"Can you imagine what's gonna happen when word of this gets out?" Luke said as they sat eating a late dinner. "No more Mr. Cool, that's for sure."

"You mustn't tell anyone," Padmé told Luke. "Mr. Wagar is a teacher in that school, and you need to respect him, despite what you make think of him."

Luke and Leia were disappointed to hear this, but realized that their mother was right. "Okay, Mom," Luke said.

"May I be excused?" Leia asked.

Vader looked at her. "You've hardly eaten anything, Leia," he pointed out.

"I know," Leia replied. "I'm not very hungry," she said.

Padmé frowned. "Are you feeling all right, Leia?" she asked.

"Yes," Leia replied. "I'm just tired," she added.

"Then perhaps it's time to call it a night," Vader suggested. "It's been a long day for everyone," he added.

“Okay,” Leia replied. ‘Goodnight.’
“Goodnight Leia,” Padmé replied. Luke, who was still cleaning his plate, followed shortly after.

Vader waited until the twins had left before turning to Padmé. “Your defense of that snake has me wondering about the relationship you had with him,” he told her without preamble.

Padmé looked at him in shock. “Relationship?” she said. “What kind of relationship do you think I had with him?”

“I don’t know,” Vader replied. “That’s why I’m asking.”

Padmé frowned. “There was no relationship,” she said, standing up. “As much as he wanted there to be.”

This didn’t make Vader feel any better and he stood up and followed her out of the room. “And what does that mean?” he demanded.

“It means he asked me out,” she told him as she walked into the living room.

Vader was silent as he watched her sit down. “And you turned him down?”

She looked up at him. “What do you think?”

“If I knew I wouldn’t be asking,” he retorted.

Padmé shook her head. “For someone who can read the minds of others you can be very obtuse sometimes,” she commented, standing up again. ‘Besides, what difference would it make to you anyway?’ she added. “It’s not like you care any more,” she put in.

“Is that what you think?” he countered hotly. “That I wouldn’t care if some other man was hitting on my wife?”

“I don’t know what to think, to tell you the truth,” she admitted tiredly. “I don’t begin to understand you anymore. Why would you kill that man just because the pool wasn’t ready?” she asked, bringing up an issue that had been on her mind for days.

“How do you know about that?” Vader asked, annoyed that she’d deftly changed the subject.

Padmé suddenly regretted her words, for she’d made a promise not to tell him how she’d learned of the man’s death. “Does it matter how?” she asked.

“Yes it does,” he countered, growing angrier.

“Why, so you can kill someone else?” she replied.

“Tell me!”

‘One of the droids told me,’ she replied with a cool lie. “I was down there the other day and asked when it would be ready, and one of the droids told me how you’d killed the foreman.”

“He was an idiot,” he retorted. “If he’d been left in charge the pool would never have been ready.”

“You could have just fired him,” she replied. “Why did you need to kill him? The man had a family!”

Vader had no answer for this. For him, killing those who failed him had become simply a matter of course. He didn't give a second thought to killing; but now she was forcing him to. And that bothered him.

His silence spoke volumes to Padmé, and she decided that she'd had enough. "I'm going to bed," she said, her voice heavy with emotion.

Vader made no reply, and simply watched her as she left before retreating to his own quarters for what was certain to be a restless night.

Chapter 40

Forty

Padmé had just fallen asleep when she heard a knock on her door. “Come in,” she said sleepily. The door opened to reveal Leia. Padmé sat up in her bed at once.

“Mom, can I lay down with you?” she asked. “I don’t feel good.”

“Of course,” Padmé said, moving over to give the child room. As Leia climbed into the bed Padmé put a hand to Leia’s brow. ‘You’re warm,’ she said with a frown. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s my stomach,” Leia told her, “it’s been bothering me all day.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Padmé asked.

“I didn’t want to miss the open house,” Leia explained.

“Oh Leia,” Padmé said, putting her arm around her shoulders. “Maybe we ought to get the medical droid to have a look at you,” she suggested.

“No, I’m just tired,” Leia insisted, although Padmé knew there was more to it.

“I think you’re coming down with something,” Padmé replied. “But we’ll wait for the morning if you want.”

Leia nodded as she lay down. “I just want to rest,” she mumbled tiredly.

Padmé lay down beside her as Leia snuggled up close to her mother, knowing that sleep would be very hard to come by now.

“Mom, why didn’t you laugh when Dad made Mr. Wagar wet his pants?” she asked after a few minutes.

“Because it was a mean thing to do,” Padmé said.

“But I thought you didn’t like Mr. Wagar?” Leia said, “you said he was a duffus.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean I condone humiliating him that way,” Padmé replied.

Leia thought about this for a few moments. “I guess Dad does do some mean things,” she admitted. “But he does a lot of really nice things too.”

“Does he?” Padmé asked.

“Yes,” Leia replied with a yawn. “He gave lots of blood to save Luke when he had his accident,” she explained.

“What accident?” Padmé asked in alarm, at which point Leia went on to explain what had happened and how it had all lead to Vader and the twins being brought together.

“And he let me go back to Alderaan to say goodbye to my adopted parents,” Leia added. “He was afraid, I could tell; he thought he’d never see me again, but he knew how much it meant to me, so he let me go. Plus he had rooms made for me and Luke, just full of cool stuff. He’s a good father, even if sometimes he is a bit... scary.”

Padmé was silent. “Yes, I know he is,” she replied, kissing the top of Leia’s head. “I know he loves you and Luke a great deal,” she added.

“He loves you too, Mom,” Leia said. “Don’t you see that?” she added, just before she drifted off to sleep. Padmé looked at her, surprised by her daughter’s words. Of course, what child wouldn’t want her parents to love one another? She reasoned. A short time later, Padmé too was asleep.

A few hours later, Padmé woke up as Leia cried out in pain. She sat up at once, alarmed by the state of distress her daughter was in.

“Mom, it hurts!” Leia cried, curling up into a fetal position. “It hurts so much!”

Padmé jumped out of bed and was about to call for the medidroid when the door to her quarters opened and Vader entered the room. He had sensed Leia’s pain and knew that she was in a very bad way.

“I don’t know what’s wrong,” Padmé told him as he went to the bed and picked Leia up. “She wasn’t feeling well earlier, but she wasn’t in this much pain!”

“She needs to go the hospital,” Vader stated.

“I’ll call for an ambulance,” Padmé told him, swallowing her fear.

“No, I can get her there faster,” he told her.

“Okay,” she replied. “Wait for me,” she said, pulling off her nightgown and hastily getting dressed, not caring that he was standing right there.

Vader watched her for a moment, and then looked down at his daughter, focusing on her instead. “It will be all right, Leia,” he told her gently, forcing the image of Padmé’s naked body from his mind.

“It hurts Daddy!” she cried as another pain gripped her.

“I know,” he said, wishing there was something, anything he could do to alleviate the pain she felt. He glanced up at Padmé. “Ready?”

“Yes,” she said, throwing on her shirt hastily. “Let’s go.”

Havening left Threepio with instructions to watch over Luke, who was blissfully unaware of what was going on, Vader and Padmé took Leia to the hospital. Vader flew at break neck speed, something Padmé was rather familiar with.

“It’s okay, sweetie,” Padmé soothed their daughter, sitting with her in the back of the speeder. “We’re almost there.”

Vader was familiar with the emergency ward of this hospital, having been there with Luke before, and directed the speeder to that sector of the large complex. The security personnel

were wise enough not to mention that it was illegal to park where he had, and simply allowed Vader and Padmé to pass by with their daughter.

By the time they'd reached the triage desk, Leia was in almost constant pain. The nurses looked up in alarm, and signaled for a droid to bring a gurney at once.

"What's the trouble?" the nurse asked.

"She's been in pain for about twenty minutes," Padmé told them. "And before that was complaining of an upset stomach."

The triage nurse nodded as she took some quick readings. "Let's get her inside," she added, addressing the droid.

"Please, can we come with her?" Padmé asked. "We're her parents."

"Don't ask, Padmé," Vader said, "just do it," he added, following the triage nurse into the examination room. Padmé joined him, deciding that for once having Darth Vader as her husband did come in handy.

Vader and Padmé stood back as the triage team gathered around the gurney, watching anxiously as the doctor examined Leia. It was all Vader could do not to shove them all aside when he saw them poking and prodding her, causing her more pain. After a few moments, the droid removed Leia from the room, leaving by another exit.

"What's wrong? Where are you taking her?" Padmé cried.

One of the team members approached them. "Your daughter's appendix is dangerously inflamed," she reported. "We're sending her to surgery right away. We'll have to ask you to wait outside," she added before leaving them again.

Reluctantly, Vader and Padmé headed back into the waiting area.

"She is in good hands, Padmé," Vader told her. "This is the same hospital where Luke was brought after his accident."

Padmé nodded, his words bringing her a small degree of comfort. "Leia told me about that," she told him. "She told me how you gave blood to save Luke's life."

"I had to," he replied. "If there was even a chance that the boy was mine, I had to do everything to save him."

"You mean... you didn't know Luke was yours when you donated blood to save him?" She asked.

"No," he replied. "Not definitively. The nurse who took the blood did a paternity test after she'd finished withdrawing the blood the surgeon needed. That was when I first knew for sure. But even before then I knew," he told her. "Just as I knew Leia was mine before Organa admitted it. She looks so much like you," he finished.

Padmé nodded. "Just as Luke looks like you," she replied. "Like you did when I first met you."

"A long time ago," he replied, the thought of how he'd once looked making him uneasy. "I haven't looked like him in a very long time."

Padmé sensed she'd struck a nerve and said nothing more, and the two of them waited in silence for word from the surgeon.

Vader paced up and down in the waiting room, reminding him of the time he'd spent here when it was Luke's whose life was in danger. *Leia is strong, and healthy*, he reminded himself; *she will get through this*.

Padmé watched him, knowing how worried he was. The love he bore the twins was obvious, and it made Padmé think back to what Leia had said just before she'd fallen asleep. *He loves you too, Mom... can't you see that?* If that were true, Padmé could hold on, she could weather this storm where it seemed that they could do nothing but argue. If she only knew for certain that the heart of Anakin Skywalker still beat inside the black armored chest of Darth Vader, then she would fight to keep them together, no matter what.

"Mom! Dad!"

Padmé and Vader turned to see their son running towards them, followed by a rather disheveled looking Captain Kassel.

"Luke, what are you doing here?" Vader admonished. "It's the dead of night!"

"Where's Leia?" Luke asked, his blue eyes wide with fear. "I know something is wrong! Where is she?"

Vader and Padmé looked at one another, neither of them terribly surprised by their son's intuition.

"She's in surgery, Luke," Padmé told him gently, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Her appendix is inflamed and they need to get it out."

Luke frowned. "That sounds really bad," he said. "Is it? Is it dangerous? Is she gonna be okay?"

Neither of Luke's parents wanted to tell them that a ruptured appendix was almost always lethal, and that there was always a risk of such thing in cases like this. Neither of them even wanted to consider such a thing.

"There is some degree of danger, like any surgery," Vader replied finally. "But she is going to be fine, Luke. She's strong and young, she'll be just fine."

Luke nodded, trying in vain to fight back the tears that filled his eyes. Padmé wrapped her arms around him as he finally allowed the tears to come, and did her best to comfort him as Vader resumed his pacing.

Vader and Padmé had been waiting almost two hours when the surgeon entered the waiting area. Vader noted that it was the same woman who had performed surgery on Luke many weeks earlier.

"How is our daughter?" Vader asked.

"She's going to be just fine," the doctor reported. "We were able to get the appendix out before any toxins were released," she added.

"Thank the Maker," Padmé sighed. "Can we see her?"

"She's asleep, but you can see her for a few minutes if you like," the surgeon replied. "Come with me."

Vader, Padmé and Luke followed the woman to the recovery wing, which Luke and Vader both recognized, and to a room where Leia was sleeping peacefully.

"My poor sweet child," Padmé said, coming over to her bedside at once and kissing her softly on the cheek.

"It's a good thing you got her here when you did," the surgeon told them. "Another five minutes and her appendix would have burst."

Padmé looked over at Vader, realizing that it was his quick thinking and fast driving that had saved their daughter's life. "It's a good thing her father's the best pilot in the galaxy," she said. Vader looked at her, sensing the warmth behind her words.

"Yes, good thing indeed," the surgeon replied.

"When can she come home?" Luke asked, standing beside his sister's bed.

"Tomorrow more than likely," the doctor replied. "There's no sense in you staying here tonight," she added. "Leia is very heavily sedated and will be asleep for at least six or seven hours. Why don't you go home, get some sleep and come back in the morning? We can contact you when she's showing signs of waking up."

"I think that's wise," Vader replied. "A hospital is no place to spend the night, is it Luke?"

Luke smiled. "Nope," he replied. "Especially if you don't have a comfy bed to sleep in."

The doctor smiled. "You're looking very well, Luke," she said, remembering him. "Feeling good?"

Luke nodded. "Feeling great," he said. "But I'll feel a whole lot better when Leia's home," he added, looking back at his twin.

The surgeon smiled. "She will be before you know it," she assured him. "Well I have other patients to see," she told Vader and Padmé. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Doctor," Padmé said. "And thank you. I understand you've saved both our children's lives now," she added.

The doctor nodded. "It was my pleasure to do so," she told her. "Take care."

"Let's go home," Vader said, not wanting to leave, but knowing that Luke needed his rest. "You heard what she said: Leia will be asleep for a long time now."

"I know," Luke said, looking at her as she slept. "Night little sis," he said with a smile. He bent close so that only she could hear. "Love you," he whispered in her ear, followed by a kiss on her cheek.

Padmé felt her eyes well up with tears at this simple gesture and took Luke's hand as they left the room. Vader remained behind, but only long enough to communicate a silent message to his unconscious daughter. *You are strong, little one. Rest now, and I will return in the morning. I love you, Leia.*

Chapter 41

Forty-one

"Can I go back with Captain Kassel?" Luke asked his parents as they met up with the captain in the waiting area. "I get to sit in the front."

"If you prefer the front," Vader replied.

"Who doesn't?" Kassel commented with a smile.

"Indeed," Vader replied, putting a hand on his son's shoulder. "We'll see you at home, then," he said.

Luke nodded, and then gave his mother a quick hug before heading off with Kassel.

"Poor Kassel," Padmé said as she and Vader headed towards the exit. "He looked half asleep when they got here."

"So long as he isn't half asleep while he's flying," Vader commented.

Padmé nodded, her own fatigue suddenly washing over her. She yawned; realizing that she'd had next to no sleep thus far this night, and by the time they'd reached home, she had drifted off to sleep. Vader noted this, and decided not to wake her up. So after he'd landed the craft in the hangar bay, he picked her up out of the speeder and carried her to the lift.

The ride in the lift seemed unusually long as Vader held his wife in his arms. Images came to his mind from earlier that day when he'd seen Padmé getting changed. It had been a long time since she'd seen his wife's body, but she was just as beautiful and desirable as ever.

Finally Vader reached Padmé's bedroom and lay her down in the bed. She opened her eyes briefly, but then rolled over and went back to sleep. Vader watched her for a moment, and then left the room, deciding that even a little sleep was better than none at all.

Vader walked toward the pool, where his wife and children were enjoying the new facility. He entered the pool deck and watched as Padmé instructed Luke in the front crawl. Luke was doing very well, for they had been at it for some time. Padmé looked up to see Vader watching them.

"I think we've been at it long enough for today," Padmé told the twins. "You two have homework to do, remember?"

"Okay, Mom," Luke said, moving to the pool's edge and climbing up the ladder while Leia joined him on the deck. They each picked up a towel and headed for the lift while Padmé swam a few more laps.

"How's the water?" Vader asked her as she moved easily on her back towards the end of the pool.

"Wonderful," she told him.

Vader nodded, enjoying watching her. Finally she came out of the water and picked up a towel. She proceeded to dry off her hair as Vader watched her. His eyes moved over her body, noting how little it had changed since he'd last seen her in a bikini.

"Something on your mind?" she asked.

"No," he lied. "Just admiring the view."

Padmé's face reddened ever so much, but didn't make any effort to cover herself up with. "Are you now?"

Vader nodded.

"Somehow that surprises me," she told him.

"Why?"

Padmé shrugged as she walked over to toss the towel in the laundry chute. "I had the impression that you didn't notice things like that anymore," she told him.

"You mean because of this?" he said, indicating the suit and mask.

"No," she replied at once. 'Because of who you are now,' she said. "Because you're not the man I fell in love with."

"That may be," he replied, walking back over to her, "but I'm still a man, and I do notice. I notice a great deal."

"Is that so?" she replied, looking up at him.

"Yes," he said. "For example, right now I notice that the water must have been cold," he told her.

Padmé frowned, and then realized what he meant. "Well, noticing is one thing," she told him, folding her arms to cover her chest. "Having it mean something to you is something else completely."

Vader took a step closer to her. "What makes you think it doesn't?" he asked. "What makes you think that I don't want to warm you up with my mouth?" he asked her.

He sensed that his words had an affect on her and smiled under his mask.

"Is that what you want to do?" she asked.

Vader nodded.

"But how? You can't even take off that mask," she reminded him.

"I can only take it off in my hyperbaric chamber," he told her. "But I'm not sure you're ready to see what I look like under this mask," he hastened to add.

"I don't care what you look like," she assured him, stepping closer to him. "I need you, that's all I care about..."

A sudden feeling of panic invaded Vader's sleeping mind at this point. He opened his eyes, somewhat annoyed to have had such an enticing dream interrupted, and sought out its source.

Realizing that it was his wife, Vader replaced his mask and helmet as quickly as possible and ran from the room.

When he entered Padmé's bedroom, he found her to be in the throes of a nightmare. Without a moment's hesitation, he sat on the edge of the bed and took her by the shoulders, shaking her gently in order to wake her up. She did so after a moment or two and looked up at him, a mixture of shock and alarm in her eyes.

"You were having a nightmare," he told her.

Padmé nodded as she sat up. "It was Leia," she told him. "We...we went to the hospital to pick her up and she was gone," she told him as panic filled her again. "Palpatine had taken her! He had stolen our little girl!"

The content of Padmé's dream disturbed Vader, and he shook his head.

"It was a dream, Padmé," he assured her. "Nothing more. If she were in danger, I'd sense it."

Padmé knew he was right, but the images from her dream were still so fresh in her mind that she couldn't stop trembling. "I know," she said at last, doing her best to master her terror. She took a deep breath as Vader watched, sensing that she was beginning to calm down, willing himself not to think about his own dream.

"Was I shouting?" she asked him.

"If you were, I didn't hear you," he told her.

Padmé frowned. "Then... how did you know I was having a nightmare?"

"You projected your fear to me," he told her. "It seems we still have some form of connection, you and me," he told her.

Padmé nodded. "I suppose so," she agreed. She was starting to grow unnerved by the way in which he was watching her. "I'm fine now, really," she said.

Vader wasn't so sure that she was, but sensed that his proximity was making her uneasy. "Very well," he said, standing up. "Try to get some sleep," he told her.

"Have you had any?" she asked, looking up at him.

"Only a little," he told her, not daring to tell her of the dream he'd had of her. "I seldom get more than that."

Padmé frowned. "That's not good," she said. "Isn't there some way... I mean, have you ever looked into medical interventions?"

Vader didn't want to tell her what had happened as a result of his attempt to conduct investigations; the emperor's punishment had been very severe, almost fatal. "There are none," he said simply. "Trust me."

"I don't believe that," she said. "With the medical technology that exists, surely there has to be something that can be done."

Vader said nothing as he walked to the door. "I wish there were," he said, in a tone of sadness that made Padmé's heart ache. "Goodnight," he said, and then left her.

The next morning

Leia was just waking up as Vader, Padmé and Luke entered her room. Neither Vader nor Luke needed any hospital staff to let them know when Leia was coming around; they could sense it clear across the city.

"Hello sweetheart," Padmé said with a smile as she sat on the edge of Leia's bed. "How are you feeling?"

Leia looked around the room at the rest of her family and then back to her mother. "Sleepy," she said finally.

"That's to be expected," Vader told her. "You've been sedated for several hours now."

"What was wrong with me?" Leia asked. "I don't remember anything after we got here."

"You had a severely inflamed appendix," Padmé told her. "They performed surgery right away."

"Yeah," Luke told her, stepping up to her bedside. "You're lucky it didn't explode! Then all this nasty junk would be in your body and you'd..."

"Luke," Vader said sharply, causing Luke to cease at once.

"Can I come home with you guys?" Leia asked.

"We'll have to wait and see what the doctor says," Padmé told her. "She'll be in to examine you soon now that you're awake."

"Too bad it's the weekend, eh Leia?" Luke asked. "Otherwise you'd probably get to miss school."

Leia smiled at her brother's comment. "Some of us like school, Luke," she replied.

"I know," Luke replied, rolling his eyes.

Just then the attending physician entered the room accompanied by a medidroid assistant.

"Good morning everyone," she said as she walked over to Leia's bedside. "And how are you feeling this morning, Miss Vader?"

"A lot better than I was last night," Leia replied.

The doctor smiled. "I'm sure of that," she said. She looked up at Leia's family. "I'd like to examine Leia now, if you please," she said.

"Of course," Padmé said, standing up. "We'll be right outside, Leia," she told her daughter, bending to give Leia a kiss on the forehead.

Once they were in the corridor, Vader turned to Luke.

"Leia does not need to know about the seriousness of what happened," he told him. "It won't serve anything except to scare her."

“Sorry,” Luke said, chastised. “I won’t say anything else.”

“Good,” Vader replied. He looked at Padmé with a shake of his head.

They didn’t have to wait long before the medidroid invited them back into Leia’s room.

“Your daughter’s in excellent health,” the doctor told them. “The bacta treatment has healed the incision nicely,” she added, looking back at Leia.

“Does that mean we can take her home?” Padmé asked.

“I would say yes,” the doctor answered. ‘Of course, she’ll have to take it easy for a few days,’ she added. “Lots of rest, no strenuous activity.”

“Does she get to miss school?” Luke asked.

“Yes, I’d say for at least three days,” the doctor replied. “Have you a medidroid in your home?” she asked.

“Yes we do,” Padmé replied.

“Good,” the doctor said. ‘I’ll prepare a datadisc for it to refer to,’ she told them. “I will order it to examine Leia daily,” she explained. “It will be able to make a determination when she may return to school. If you’re not sure, or you disagree with it’s prognosis, please don’t hesitate to contact me here, and I’ll be happy to make a house call if you wish.”

“Thank you Doctor,” Padmé said. “We appreciate all you’ve done.”

The doctor smiled. “It’s my job, Milady,” she said. ‘I’m just glad we were able to help the young lady feel better,’ she added, looking down at Leia. “I’ll get Leia’s release forms in order. Excuse me.”

“You’re so lucky,” Luke grumbled as Padmé helped Leia out of the bed. “You get to miss three whole days of school! *Three whole days!!*”

Vader sighed loudly. “Let’s go,” he said, directing his son out the door so Padmé could help Leia change. “You can bemoan your wretched state in the corridor.”

Leia giggled at her father’s words. “Dad’s really funny sometimes,” she commented.

Padmé nodded as she opened the haversack she’d brought. “Yes, he always has been,” she agreed.

“I bet he made you laugh a lot when you were together, didn’t he?” Leia asked as Padmé helped her get changed.

“Yes, he did,” Padmé agreed. Thinking of those times was painful for her, and Leia sensed it.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” Leia said, “I didn’t mean to make you sad.”

Padmé looked at her daughter. “You didn’t,” she said, forcing herself to smile. “Come on; let’s get you to the fresher. I brought your toothbrush.”

“You think of everything!” Leia exclaimed. “You’re the best, Mom,” she added with a smile.

Chapter 42

Forty-two

“Lord Vader, a word with you before you go.”

Vader turned to see a hospital administrator whose face bore a rather serious expression.

“What is it?” Vader asked, anxious to get his family home.

“There was reporters here earlier, sir,” the man explained. “You know how much they’ve been talking about your family since it became known that your wife is alive.”

Vader nodded, for he knew it well, and had stopped watching the holonet for that reason.

“Well this man, Bruenor Stoma is his name, is one of the worst of the lot,” the administrator continued. “Always has the most sensational stories, most of the time they’re full of half truths and innuendo,” he added, testing Vader’s patience.

“Get on with it,” Vader snapped finally.

“Well anyway, Stoma was here, Lord Vader,” the man said finally. “He was in the intensive care unit trying to get information about your daughter.”

“What!” Vader roared. “That parasite was near my child?!”

“No,” the man replied at once. ‘I promise you that he never got near her,’ he assured Vader. “As soon as he was detected I had my security guards detain him,” he continued.

“How did he get past security?” Vader demanded. “Who let him in this far?”

“He won’t say, sir,” the administrator replied. “Obviously someone has done so. We don’t make it a habit of allowing reporters into our wards to roam about.”

“No,” Vader replied. ‘Obviously not. Where is he now?’ he asked. “I would very much like to meet this man.”

“I thought you might,” the administrator replied. “Come with me.”

Vader turned to his wife, who had heard the entire conversation with growing apprehension. “Take the children home,” he instructed her. “And tell Kassel to come here when you have.”

Padmé nodded. “You’re going to kill this man, aren’t you?” she asked him quietly so that the twins wouldn’t hear.

“What would you have me do?” he asked her. “He represents a threat to our family’s security. What if he is in the employ of the emperor? Would that change your opinion of my methods?”

Padmé frowned, realizing he’d made a valid point. “Do what you must,” she said and then turned back to the twins whom she escorted out of the waiting area towards the exit.

“Take me to this Stoma parasite,” Vader said, returning his attention to the administrator.

“Right this way, sir.”

Bruenor Stoma was well known amid the Coruscant media. Most people hated him, for he was known as a sensationalist and an opportunist. Some even called him a bald faced liar. He was an arrogant man who thought nothing of using the misfortunes of others to create sensational stories that always sold. He considered it his duty to the public to bring them this information, and made no apologies for the methods he employed to do so.

“It’s about time,” Stoma snapped when he saw the hospital administrator enter the small room where he was being held. “I demand that you release me at once, I demand...” he stopped when the administrator was followed by Darth Vader. The sight of the infamous dark lord was enough to shut even the likes of Stoma up.

“I’ll just leave you two alone,” the administrator said. “I’m sure Lord Vader has a lot to say to you,” he added, looking at Stoma with a smirk.

Stoma said nothing in reply, but simply looked up at Vader as he walked towards him.

“Indeed,” Vader replied. “I do. We shall begin with the name of your contact inside the hospital,” he said.

Stoma’s eyes narrowed as he tried to hide his fear. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he replied.

“Don’t toy with me, Stoma,” Vader warned angrily. ‘There is no way you could have reached the ICU without a security code,’ he told him. “Someone either gave you one or let you in. I want to know who it was.”

“I’m a resourceful man, Lord Vader,” Stoma replied. “I don’t need a contact to get me what I need.”

“Then it shall be only you who pays for the consequences of your actions,” Vader warned, lifting a gloved hand. Stoma immediately felt a constriction in his larynx.

“You’ll... never get away with this!” Stoma gasped.

“I beg to differ,” Vader replied. “You shall serve as an example, Stoma,” he told him as he slowly squeezed, crushing the man’s windpipe and then tossing his body against a far wall. Vader walked over and looked at the man where he lay, purple faced on the floor.

“Security!” he called. At once two security guards entered the room.

“Remove this,” Vader said, pointing at the body. “And if there are any reporters skulking about, be sure they get a good look at it,” he added.

“Yes sir,” the guards replied, picking up the body of the reporter and carrying it out the door. Vader followed, encountering Captain Kassel in the waiting area.

“I guess I don’t need to ask who that was,” Kassel said to his commander as they headed for the exit.

“A foolish man,” Vader said. ‘Foolish enough to think he could get away with tampering with my family’s privacy,’ he added. “He’ll serve as an example to others who dare to

consider doing such a thing.”

Kassel nodded. “I hate to be the bearer of bad news,” he told Vader as they reached the speeder. “But you’re expected on Kamino today, sir.”

“Damn it,” Vader grumbled. “I’d forgotten about that.”

“One more thing,” Kassel said hesitantly.

“What now?”

“The emperor’s secretary sent you an invitation to some... party,” Kassel reported.

“Yes, I know about that,” Vader replied.

“It’s tomorrow night,” Kassel said.

“What!?” Vader exclaimed. “Tomorrow?”

“Afraid so, sir,” Kassel replied.

Vader uttered a Hutttese curse under his breath that Kassel had heard on more than one occasion. “Take me to my shuttle,” he instructed the captain. “I will go directly to the *Exactor*,” he added.

“Of course, sir,” Kassel said. “I’ll explain to Lady Vader what happened.”

Vader nodded, knowing that Padmé would be most unhappy to hear how soon the party was. “Tell her I’ll contact her once I’m on board the ship,” he told him. “And accept the invitation to the emperor’s party.”

Kassel turned and looked at Vader briefly, knowing how much the dark lord hated social events. “Of course, sir,” he said. “I’ll do that as soon as I get back.”

Vader turned and looked out the window of the shuttle, wondering if things could get any worse.

Vader residence

Leia had taken to reading in the comfort of her bed almost immediately upon reaching home, and Luke hung around to keep her company. Despite the fact that he had lived his first ten years without a sibling, he found now that he was lost without his twin.

Padmé stayed with them for a while, and then decided to go and check on the progress of the pool. She was still hoping to get the address of the family of the man who had been killed as well, and hoped that Foreman Genikins would be able to provide it.

As she stepped onto the lift, she was met by Captain Kassel. Padmé was surprised that Vader wasn’t with him.

“Where is my husband?” Padmé asked him. “Not at the hospital still, I hope.”

“No,” Kassel replied. ‘I’m afraid he’s gone to the *Exactor*, Milady,’ he told her. “He’s needed on Kamino.”

“Oh,” Padmé replied. “He didn’t say anything to me earlier,” she said.

"I think with everything that happened with Leia he forgot," Kassel replied.

"I find that hard to believe," Padmé remarked.

Kassel smiled. "At any rate, he said he'd contact you once he's on board. Which is probably any time now, I'd estimate."

Padmé nodded. "Thank you, Captain," she replied. "I'll wait in his office to hear from him."

Padmé hadn't waited long before the comscreen in Vader's office indicated an incoming message. She sat down in the enormous chair and activated the screen. Within moments Vader's image appeared.

The first thing Vader noticed was how small she looked in his huge chair, but he said nothing to that affect.

"Kassel tells me you're on your way to Kamino," she told him.

"Unfortunately," he replied. "It was unavoidable."

Padmé nodded, not wanting to know what he was doing there. "How long will you be away?"

"Only twenty-four hours," he told her. "I must return tomorrow. The emperor's party is tomorrow evening."

Padmé's eyes widened. "What?" she cried. "Tomorrow??"

"I'm afraid so," he replied. "And believe me; I'm as delighted as you are by how soon it is."

Padmé sighed. "I don't have anything to wear to such an affair," she told him.

Vader found this hard to believe given the enormity of her wardrobe. "No? that's....astounding," he teased.

Padmé wasn't amused. "It's not like I brought my clothes with me to Naboo," she told him. "I left them back at our... at 500 Republica."

Vader nodded. "Where they've sat for ten years," he added.

Padmé frowned. "Somehow I doubt that," she replied. "Whoever took over the place must have either sold them or given them all away."

"I did nothing of the kind," Vader told her.

"What do you mean, you did?" she asked.

"I took over the lease of the apartment there after I believed you'd died," he told her. "Somehow I couldn't stand the thought of anyone else living there."

This surprised Padme, and for a moment she couldn't say anything. "I... I had no idea," she finally said.

"At any rate, you need something new to wear," he said. "And I don't want you to go shopping, not with the media so actively seeking you out."

“So what do you propose?” she asked.

“I shall make arrangements to have a selection of gowns brought to you,” he told her. “Choose several of them, there are bound to be other affairs such as this one.”

“Very well,” she said, surprised by his thoughtfulness. “Thank you.”

“How is Leia?” he asked her.

“Tired,” she replied. “But happy to be home.”

“No doubt,” he replied.

“What happened to that reporter?” she asked.

Vader was silent for a moment, not sure she really wanted to know. “I made an example of him,” he told her. “Hopefully when word of his demise gets out, other reporters will not be as bold as he was.”

Padmé nodded, knowing that he believed he’d done what was best for their family.

“I have to go,” he told her. “Have an enjoyable time shopping,” he told her.

“Thanks,” she replied. “See you tomorrow.”

Padmé ended the transmission, and then had an idea. She hadn’t had a chance to contact her sister since being discovered by Vader, and was no doubt worried. Until that day Padmé had spoken to Sola almost daily, and yet more than a week had passed since she had. Without hesitating another moment, she keyed in the code for Sola’s home, deciding not to put it off another moment.

“Padmé!” Sola said. “Thank the Maker, I’ve been so worried!”

“I’m sorry,” Padmé replied. “My life has been a little crazy lately.”

Sola nodded. “So I hear,” she replied, ‘it’s all over the holonet. So tell me what happened, Padmé,’ she said. “Tell me how that monster found you.”

Chapter 43

Forty-three

Once Leia had fallen asleep, Padmé and Luke went down to the lower level to the newly finished pool. It wasn't quite as large as the one at school, but Luke didn't mind. In fact, he was happy about it, for he found it far less intimidating.

"It was so great of Dad to get this pool ready for us so fast," Luke told his mother as they walked to the water's edge.

Padmé merely nodded, not wishing to tell her son the lengths his father had gone to in order to make sure the pool was ready quickly. It seemed that Vader was a stark dichotomy of cruelty and caring, and that kept Padmé guessing constantly. Just today he had shown that same contrast when in one breath he was tell her of his plans to have evening gowns brought to her, and the next how he'd made an example of the reporter who'd been caught in the ICU. It was as though there were two men, each quite distinct, vying for supremacy within the heart and mind of Darth Vader. And if that were true, then Padmé knew there was at least a chance that Anakin Skywalker still existed.

"The water's way warmer than the pool at school," Luke commented as he entered the pool.

"Your father never did like the cold," Padmé commented with a smile. "Come on; let's see the stroke we were working on during our last lesson." *A lesson which seems like a lifetime ago*, she reflected as Luke began. *Was it only a week ago?* She reflected, pondering just how much her life had changed in a matter of one short week. Padmé was hopeful that there were more changes on the horizon, changes that would spell the end of Palpatine's hold on the galaxy, and on her husband. *That will be a day of rejoicing when that monster is dead*, she thought grimly.

"How's this, Mom?"

Padmé was shaken from her ruminations by her son, and focused her attentions solely on him. "Great, Luke," she told him with a smile. "You're doing just great!"

Later that afternoon

Leia had woken from her nap feeling a lot better, and was excited at the prospect of helping her mother pick out evening gowns. When Vader had told Padmé that he'd have some sent over for her to choose from, she'd had no idea he meant the entire store.

It took nearly two hours for the droids to bring in all the racks of clothing, shoes and accessories, all from the most exclusive boutique in Coruscant. Padmé and Leia watched in astonishment as they kept coming, one after another, into the living room until there was barely room for another garment. Finally, when the entire store's inventory had been brought into the room, one of the clerks who had come along with it invited Padmé and Leia to start looking.

There were so many gowns to look at that Padmé simply started at one end of the array and Leia at the other, each one showing the other something that they liked. By the time they'd reached the end of the line, a few hours later, there were at least twenty gowns set aside for Padmé to try on and select from. The droids worked quickly to remove the extra garments and set up a makeshift dressing room for Padmé to try the dresses on in. It was exciting for her to be trying on so many new gowns, for it had been ages since she had.

"They're all so beautiful!" Leia said as Padmé modeled them for her. "And they all look great on you! I can't decide which one is best!"

Padmé too was having a hard time deciding on one, for they were all so elegant and beautiful. But there was one that she felt was the perfect gown for the occasion.

"This is the one I'll wear tomorrow night," she told Leia as she looked at her reflection in the mirror the droids had set up. "This is perfect."

Leia nodded. "I think so too," she replied.

"An excellent choice, Milady," the clerk said. Padmé had the feeling that she'd have said that no matter which gown she'd chosen. "I will have your order sent over first thing tomorrow morning."

"Thank you," Padmé said, and then disappeared behind the dressing screen to get changed.

It was nearly bed time by the time the droids had removed all the merchandise, and both Padmé and Leia were worn out.

"Is it safe to come in now?" Luke asked, poking his head in the room.

Padmé laughed. "Yes, quite safe."

"I've never seen so much girly stuff in my life!" he said as he came in and took a seat beside his mother. "Did you get something nice?"

"Yes," Padmé replied, putting an arm around her son. "Very nice."

"Just wait until Dad sees you in it," Leia commented with a smile. "He's going to flip!"

Padmé simply smiled in response, although part of her wished that Leia was right. "Come on," she said to Leia. "You've over done it today, Miss," she said, standing up. "Time for bed."

Leia didn't argue the point.

Kamino

Vader had to slow his pace to walk alongside the sauntering Prime Minister as they toured the cloning facility together. *Was this the big emergency?* Vader wondered in irritation; *another blasted tour??*

"As you can see, Lord Vader," Lama Su was saying, "we have been keeping up to date with new developments in technology," he said. "Why just this week we started up our organ regeneration unit," he said. "We believe it will have far reaching implications well beyond the clone population."

This caught Vader's attention at once. "Organ regeneration?" he asked.

Lamu Su turned to Vader and nodded. "Yes," he said. "Something I think, perhaps, you might be particularly interested in knowing more about, Lord Vader," he said.

Vader's first reaction was anger that the man had presumed to think such a thing. But the anger quickly gave way to curiosity, as he finally realized why the Prime Minister had requested his presence at this time. "I am," he said. "I would like to see this facility, Prime Minister."

"I thought you might," Lama Su replied. "Right this way."

Vader followed the Prime Minister to a newly opened wing of the massive facility, doing his best not to get too hopeful. Could this be the solution he'd been waiting for? Was this the medical intervention his master didn't want him to know about?

Lama Su showed Vader around the impressive facility, where droids and medical technicians were already at work.

"So far we have successfully regenerated most of the major human organs," the head technician told Vader. "And have had a lot of success surgically replacing organs within clones that..."

"Have you performed this surgery on non-clones?" Vader asked.

"Not yet," Lama Su replied. "But there's no reason to think that it wouldn't be as successful with a human recipient."

Vader nodded. "And... how long would such regeneration take?"

"For a non clone organism it would take months," the head technician replied. "Far longer than for a clone."

Vader knew that he was risking a great deal by investigating this; if the emperor knew he would undoubtedly be very angry. *But he won't be alive much longer*, Vader thought darkly; *I will see to that...*

"Lord Vader, is there something you'd like to ask these technicians before we move on?" Lama Su asked.

Vader hesitated, but only for a moment. "Yes, there is," he said. "What is involved in regenerating organs? How does the process begin?"

"We need to harvest healthy cells from the organs," one of the technicians responded, "and once we've determined their genetic code, we can begin the regeneration progress. Skin and bones take less time than vital organs such as the heart or liver or lungs and..."

"I want to start the process immediately," Vader interjected. "I don't care what it costs."

Lama Su nodded. "We'd be happy to help you, Lord Vader," he said. 'You need to know, however, that the harvesting process is very invasive in most cases,' he added, "and that you'd need to remain here for at least forty-eight hours afterwards."

Vader was greatly disappointed to hear this. He didn't have forty-eight hours; he needed to get back to Coruscant in twelve hours. "I don't have forty-eight hours," he said. "Is there

nothing you can do at all in the time I have?”

The technicians consulted for a few moments before replying.

“We can do a preliminary examination,” one technician replied, “to determine what needs to be done.”

Vader nodded. “Then do it,” he said. “Let’s get this started.”

Vader residence — the next morning

“But Leia gets to stay home,” Luke moped as he poked at his breakfast.

“Leia had surgery two days ago,” Padmé pointed out. “Surely you can understand that.”

“Yeah,” Luke replied. “I just... I don’t want to go without her, Mom,” he said.

Padmé frowned, not sure if her son was pulling a fast one on her or if he genuinely didn’t want to go without Leia. *If his father were here, he’d know*, she reflected.

“Well if you feel that strongly,” Padmé said at last. ‘Your room could use some cleaning today,’ she said. “Since you’re not going to school, you can do that. It will take you most of the day, I’m sure.”

Luke’s eyes widened, the prospect of spending the day cleaning more horrifying than that of going to school. “Uh... I guess I’ll go to school in that case,” he said.

Padmé smiled. “I thought you might feel that way,” she replied.

Leia woke up shortly after Luke had left for school, and was eating breakfast when See Threepio entered the room.

“Excuse me, Milady,” he said. “But there’s a delivery here for you.”

“Must be your dress,” Leia said excitedly.

Padmé nodded and stood up to follow Threepio out. Kassel had already cleared the delivery for security, and two droids were already carrying several large packages to Padmé’s room.

“Wait a minute,” she said to one of the droids. “What is all this? There was only one gown!”

“Lord Vader gave us orders to bring every dress that you tried on,” one of the droids told her.

Padmé’s eyes widened in surprise. “But I must have tried on at least twenty!” she exclaimed.

“Twenty six, to be exact,” the droid replied. “We’ve brought all twenty-six, as well as the matching shoes and handbags,” it told her.

Padmé was too shocked to say anything, and simply followed the droid to her room where packages filled the room.

“Mom, what *is* all this?” Leia asked as she entered the room where Padmé and Threepio had started unpacking all the new apparel.

“You’re not going to believe this,” Padmé told her, “but your father told the clerks to send over every dress that I tried on,” she said.

“Whoa,” Leia said with a smile, looked at the row of new gowns that Threepio was busily adding to. “He must *really* love you, Mom,” she commented.

Padmé wasn’t sure what to say at this point, for she wasn’t accustomed to this level of generosity. And yet, this was the same person who had given her the most precious things she owned, the jappor snippet he’d carved with his own hands and his padawan braid. He’d never had money to buy her things back then, but now that he did, it seemed that he was intent on spoiling her as much as the twins. She smiled.

“Maybe so,” she said at last, considering the notion for the first time. “He’s very generous, at any rate,” she added.

Leia nodded. “How are you going to wear your hair?” she asked.

Padmé frowned. “I don’t know,” she said. ‘Maybe I should get it done, what do you think?’

“Good idea,” she said. “Let’s look for some stylists on the holonet,” she said.

“Only they’ll have to come here,” Padmé said. “Your father would freak out if he knew I’d gone into town to get my hair done.”

Leia frowned. “Why?”

Padmé sighed. “The media, Leia,” she said, starting in on the packages of shoes next. “Until they’ve tired of me, I have to keep a low profile.”

“I understand,” Leia said. “Well, I’m sure if you tell them who you are, any stylist on Coruscant would come,” she added.

“Yes, probably,” Padmé agreed. “Come on, let’s go have a look,” she said, leaving Threepio to finish unpacking.

Chapter 44

A.N. Although this chapter remains within the “T” guidelines, it does contain some implications of mature activities.

Forty-four

A stylist, who was only too happy to provide service for the Lady Vader, and brought a veritable team with her to attend to Padmé.

Leia watched from the edge of her mother’s bed as the women worked on her hair and her makeup.

“What do you think, Leia?” Padmé asked at last as she turned around to show her daughter. The stylists had taken advantage of Padmé’s naturally curly hair and swept it back into an elegant chignon, leaving a cluster of curls at the back of her head. The make up they had applied was understated and elegant, her eyes having taken on an exotic quality.

“Wow,” Leia breathed. “You look *amazing*,” she told her mother.

Padmé smiled. “Thank you,” she said, turning back to the mirror.

“Would Milady like some help getting dressed?” the eager-to-please stylist asked.

“No,” Padmé said, standing up. ‘I think I can manage. Thank you very much,’ she added with a smile. “You’ve been very helpful.”

After a great deal of groveling, the team of beauticians left, a healthy tip provided for each of them on top of their fee.

Padmé had just unzipped the garment bag to take out the gown she’d selected to wear when Luke’s voice was heard from the corridor. He’d spent two hours since arriving home from school in the workshop, more than a little freaked out by all the fuss being made over his mother.

“Dad’s home!” he called down the hallway.

Leia stood up and started towards the door. She then stopped and turned back for a moment. “Do you need help, Mom?” she asked.

“No, you go ahead and say hello to your father,” Padmé said. “I can manage.”

“Okay,” Leia replied, and left the room at once, closing the door behind her.

“Dad, look!” Luke said as Vader emerged from the lift. “I finished it! I finished the TIE fighter!”

Vader stopped, summoning his patience once more, to examine the model that his son held up so proudly for his inspection.

“Excellent work, Luke,” Vader told him. “A most satisfactory result.”

Luke beamed under his father's praise.

"And how are you feeling, young one?" Vader asked Leia as she met him half way up the corridor.

"I'm good," she told him with a smile. 'Mom's getting ready for the party,' she told him. "Just wait until you see her," she added with a smile.

Vader nodded, quite certain that Padmé would take his breath away. She always did. "Did she enjoy her shopping?" he asked as he and the twins entered the living room.

"Did she ever!" Leia replied. "We both did. She was so surprised when you bought all the gowns she'd tried on!"

"You must be really rich, eh Dad?" Luke asked.

Vader was amused by his son's question. "You could say so, Luke," he replied. "Yes."

"Well? How do I look?"

All three turned to the doorway where Padmé had just entered the room.

"Whoa," was Luke's only response, while Leia's was a huge smile. Vader, however, was momentarily rendered speechless as he looked at his wife.

The dress she had chosen was black taffeta, form fitting through the bodice and then flaring slightly at the hips. It was off the shoulder, and she wore a matching black stole that she had draped around her arms.

"You look stunning," Vader decided at last, finally able to speak.

Padmé smiled, pleased that he'd told her so. "Thank you," she said. 'And thank you for all the gowns,' she added. "You really didn't need to buy all of them."

"No, I didn't," he agreed. 'But I wanted to. Now that I know what color you've chosen to wear tonight I have something else to give you,' he said. "Assuming they didn't mess up the order," he added, leaving the room.

"They brought something to your office," Leia told him. "It was marked with your name on it."

"Good," Vader said, heading there at once. "I'll be right back."

Padmé had no idea what else he could have bought her on top of all he already had, and simply looked at the children.

"Told you he'd flip when he saw you in that dress," Leia said to her mother.

Vader returned to the room at this point, a velvet rectangular box in his hand which he proceeded to hand to Padmé.

"You really didn't need to get me anything else," she said as she opened the box. When she saw its contents she gasped. Inside was a pendant made of flawless onyx, its surface shimmering in the overhead lights. 'This is beautiful!' she said, looking up at him. "Simply beautiful!"

Vader was pleased that she liked it so well, and took it out of the box. “May I?” he asked.

“Yes, please,” Padmé said, turning around so that he could fasten the pendant.

“Perfect,” Leia said, smiling ear to ear. ‘You look so beautiful, Mom,’ she added. “Doesn’t she Dad?”

Vader nodded, totally enthralled by her. “Yes,” he said. “Very much so. I suppose we ought to go.”

Padmé felt her tension level skyrocket at the thought of it. “Yes, I suppose we should,” she said. “I’ll just get my bag.”

Vader watched her go, and then turned to the twins. “Be sure you get your homework done,” he told him. “We’ll be very late.”

“Okay Dad,” Luke said. “I’ve got a whole pile of it for Leia,” he added with a grin.

“I happen to like school work,” Leia said.

Luke merely rolled his eyes in response.

“All set,” Padmé said as she returned to the room. “Be good,” she told the twins, hugging each of them in turn.

“We will,” Leia assured her. “Have fun.”

“We’ll try,” Padmé replied, looking up at Vader.

Vader shared her apprehension, and simply offered her his arm in response. Padmé slipped her arm through his and they left the room.

“How romantic,” Leia sighed.

Once again, Luke rolled his eyes.

Padmé didn’t speak for a while once they’d left the complex, for she was doing her best to summon her nerve. The thought of facing Palpatine again after all he had done to her and her family was a daunting one and she knew she needed to put on her best diplomatic face for the occasion.

“How was your trip to Kamino?” she asked finally.

Vader hesitated before responding. He was cautiously hopeful about the new technologies they had discovered there, but didn’t want to tell Padmé about it yet. If it turned out that he wasn’t a candidate for the procedure, the disappointment would be too difficult to bear. “Uneventful,” he told her finally.

Padmé didn’t like the way it had taken him so long to respond, and believed she knew why it had.

“Please tell me you didn’t kill someone while you were there,” she said quietly.

Vader looked at her briefly. He said nothing for a moment as he remembered back to what he had told the emperor. *She hates me... she wants nothing to do with me...* Wouldn’t it make

that seem more apparent if Padmé were angry right now? Even if it meant lying to her to make that happen?

“Very well,” he said. “I won’t tell you.”

Padmé said nothing in response and turned to look out the window, her tension level rising even more. “So what do you want me to do tonight?” she asked. “What part am I to play?”

“The part of the embittered wife,” he told her. “As far as the emperor knows, we’re not even civil to one another.”

“He thinks we hate one another?”

“No, I could never make him believe that,” he replied. “However he thinks you hate me,” he added.

Padmé looked at him, the implication behind his words surprising her. “I’ll do my best to play the part,” she assured him.

“That would be to our advantage,” he replied as the Imperial palace came into view. Vader could sense Padmé’s apprehension and fear as they drew closer. ‘Stay with me,’ he told her. “I know you’re not looking forward to this,” he added. “We’ll get through it easier if we’re together.”

Padmé nodded, only marginally reassured by his words.

The ballroom of the Imperial palace was brightly lit and cheerfully decorated for the occasion, with a small orchestra set up at one end of the room. Padmé couldn’t help but think of the hypocrisy of it all, and of all the tax payers’ money that had paid for the lavish affair.

Vader had always hated parties, but never more so than now, when the future of his family hung in the balance. He felt all eyes follow him and Padmé as they made their entrance, sensing the surprise of the other guests at seeing him with such a stunning woman on his arm.

“We must say hello to the emperor,” he told her.

“Do we have to?” she asked quietly.

Vader just looked at her in response.

“Just kidding,” she told him. “Let’s get this over with.”

Palpatine stood amidst a crowd of toadies as Vader and Padmé approached him. He looked over, noting briefly the lack of warmth between the pair, and then smiled. “Lord Vader! Lady Vader! What a pleasure it is to see you both!”

Vader felt his wife’s tension through their joined arms and bowed his head to the emperor. “My master,” he said. “We are honored to be here.”

Palpatine sensed Padmé’s deep loathing for him and turned to her with a smile that made her skin crawl. “It is good to see you again, Padmé,” he said. “I was so relieved to hear that you were alive after so long!”

Padmé smiled her best diplomat smile. “Thank you, your Majesty,” she replied.

“And now the two of you have a wonderful family,” Palpatine continued. “How delightful! And how are they? Your offspring?”

“Leia has recently had surgery, my master,” Vader told him. “Very serious surgery,” he added.

Palpatine frowned, for he could tell that Vader was telling the truth. “Oh, how dreadful,” he said. “I do hope she’s all right.”

“She will be,” Padmé told him.

Palpatine nodded. “I do hope you were able to have her tested before her illness, Lord Vader,” he said, looking up at Vader without a trace of a smile.

“No, I was not,” Vader replied. “The surgery was the result of an illness that had afflicted her for several days now,” he told him. “There was never an opportunity to do so.”

Palpatine’s frown deepened. “I see,” he said, his displeasure obvious. “What of the boy? Is he too indisposed?” he asked sarcastically.

“Luke is not ill,” Vader replied. “But I waited to do his, since it only made sense to do them both at once.”

“It was rather presumptuous of you to make that determination,” Palpatine snapped.

“Forgive me, Master,” Vader replied. “I will get them done as soon as Leia has recovered.”

Palpatine’s expression didn’t change, and Vader knew that if they were alone right now he’d be getting a healthy dose of Sith lightning.

“I suppose that will have to suffice,” Palpatine said at last, his voice clearly showing his displeasure. “I don’t suppose there are any plans to have any new additions to the family, are there?” he asked, quite unexpectedly.

Neither Vader nor Padmé were prepared for the question, and looked at one another in bewilderment.

“Ah yes, that’s right,” Palpatine said, the smile returning to his face, ‘you’re incapable of it, aren’t you my friend? Pity such a beautiful woman as your wife here will spend the rest of her days pining away for a real man,’ he added, twisting the knife a little more. “Do enjoy yourselves,” he concluded as he walked away to another group of toadies.

“Can we leave now?” Padmé asked, looking up at Vader. He said nothing, for the emperor’s remarks had hit him hard.

“No,” he told her. “It would not look good if we did so.”

“I don’t care,” she said, her voice full of anger. “I won’t stay here and listen to that monster denigrate you that way.”

Her words surprised him; but then he realized the awful truth. She believed what the emperor had said. “Padmé, I hope you didn’t...” he began, hardly knowing how to phrase his question.

But Padmé wasn't listening to him by this point. She had spotted someone on the other side of the room that she very much wanted to talk to: Bail Organa.

"I have a few things I'd like to say to that man," she said, nodding in Organa's direction.

This may not be such a bad party after all, Vader reflected, allowing his wife to lead him over to where Organa stood with some other senators sipping punch.

"Hello Bail."

Organa looked over and did a double take when he saw who was speaking to him. "Padmé!" he exclaimed, coming over to her. "I can't believe it! You look wonderful!"

"Spare me the empty flattery, Bail," Padmé retorted. 'You have a lot of nerve pretending to be surprised to see me when all along you knew I was alive,' she added, her anger rising. "Or perhaps you've conveniently forgotten how you left me on Pollis Massa after stealing my daughter!"

Organa's smile faded, and he looked rather embarrassedly at the other senators who were quite interested in the turn the conversation was taking.

"I didn't steal Leia," he said in a low voice. "I gave her a good home, a loving home, a..."

"You lied to her mother," Vader stepped in. "You and that cowardly bastard Kenobi."

Organa looked at Vader, barely able to conceal his hatred for him. "And was that any worse than what you did to her?" he countered. "Your own wife? Who was pregnant with your children?"

Vader took a threatening step in Organa's direction. "If we weren't in a public place you'd be dead by now," Vader growled. Organa felt slight pressure on his larynx and looked at Vader with bald hatred in his eyes. Vader released him, reluctantly, after a moment or two as Padmé stepped in.

"What happened between Anakin and I is none of your concern," Padmé told Organa. "You had no right to judge him or his actions, and certainly had no right to steal our children!"

Organa was shocked by her words, and began to fear that the plans he and Obi-Wan were working on would be in vain. "Padmé, I can't believe you're saying this!" he cried. "After what he did to you! After all you've been through because of him! He doesn't deserve your forgiveness!"

Padmé's only response was a resounding slap across the face. Vader looked at her, deciding he'd never been prouder of her. He then took Padmé's hand and led her away. She was only too happy to come with him.

"He had that coming," Vader told Padmé as he handed her a glass of wine from a nearby serving droid's tray.

"Yes he did," she replied, still shaking with anger. "The arrogance, the condescension..." she said, shaking her head. "I was amazed his wife had the courage to come to me. She's always been so controlled by him."

"She came to you on Naboo?" he asked.

"Yes," Padmé told him. "That's how I found out that the twins were alive. My sister tried to tell me, she'd seen you and the twins on the holonet but I couldn't believe it. It wasn't until Brea came and told me that I believed it."

Vader nodded. "No doubt that didn't go over well with the viceroy," he commented.

"No doubt," she agreed, her eyes searching out the room for the emperor. "He doesn't stay for the whole evening, does he?" she asked.

"No, he doesn't have the stamina," he told her. "He usually makes his exit about two hours into the evening."

"That long?" she asked.

"I'm afraid so," he told her. "We'll have to find a way to pass the time, I suppose. Shall we dance?" he suggested.

"Very well," she replied. "But what about Palpatine?" she asked.

Vader was silent for a moment. "Walk away," he told her. "Angrily, walk away. Now."

Padmé frowned, and did as he told her, knowing that he'd done so for a reason. Within a few moments she felt his hand upon her arm, firmly, but not intending to hurt her. She turned to him, playing the part. "Is this what you had in mind?" she asked, giving him her best icy glare.

"Yes, exactly," he said. "Now we can dance," he said, pulling her closer.

From across the dance floor, the emperor observed his apprentice and his wife, pleased by the clear animosity between them.

"She hardly seems the same woman," one of his flatterers commented.

"Who?" Palpatine asked.

"Senator Amidala," the toady replied. "She used to be so good hearted, so warm; seems she's become very bitter in her isolation."

Palpatine smiled. "Yes, I suppose she has," he agreed. He then turned back to the conversation, deciding Vader and Padmé were sufficiently miserable in one another's company.

"I suppose that was for the benefit of your master," Padmé remarked as he lead her to the dance floor.

Vader ignored her comment for a moment. "I've learned to play my role very well, Padmé," he told her. "I've had to in order to survive."

Padmé hated to hear this, but said nothing.

"I have learned to be very... creative," he told her. "As well as very observant. One learns a lot that way."

"Is that so?"

Vader nodded. "I could tell you something about virtually every person in this room," he told her.

"You know them all so well?" she asked.

"No," he replied. 'I have no interest in knowing them,' he assured her. "I've discovered a rather amusing diversion that I use to get through the tedium of meetings," he told her. "I simply sift through the minds of those present for anything interesting."

Padmé's mouth dropped open. "Are you serious?" she asked.

Vader nodded. "Completely," he told her. "You'd be amazed by how easy it is, actually."

Padmé couldn't help but laugh. "I had no idea," she said. "So tell me," she continued.

"Very well," he replied. He looked around the room briefly until he spotted a familiar person. 'That man over there,' he said, turning her so she could see him. "The one leaning so close to that woman."

"Yes, I see him," she replied.

"That man is in very serious debt," Vader told her. "His wife has already left him, and he's dangerously close to having a bounty on his head."

"You learned all that just from sifting through his thought?" she asked.

"People's most pressing concerns are usually in the forefront of their minds," he told her.

"I suppose so," she agreed.

"And that woman," he said, pointing to a rather drunken woman wearing an ill-fitting tight dress. 'She's considering leaving her husband, and has had clandestine affairs with half the men in this room,' he told her. "As well as a few of the women," he added.

"Well look at her," Padmé said. "She looks the part I'd say."

"Quite true," Vader agreed. 'And that man,' he said nodding in the direction of a rather portly man at the bar. "The fat one wearing the jacket that doesn't fit him."

Padmé spotted him at once. "What about him?"

"He's having...performance difficulties," he told her.

Padmé giggled, the wine having loosened her up somewhat. She stopped when she remembered what the emperor had said. Was what he'd said true? The man was a pathological liar; surely this was merely another one of his lies, meant to humiliate Vader.

"The emperor is going to leave momentarily," Vader said as the dance concluded.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

Vader nodded.

"Then I'm going to the fresher," she said, not wishing to be part of what was sure to be an elaborate send off for the old toad. "I'll be right back."

Vader knew exactly why she'd left, and quite frankly couldn't blame her. No sooner had she disappeared when the traditional fanfare was heard and everyone fell silent.

"His Majesty, the Imperial Galactic Emperor Palpatine, bids you a good night," one of Palpatine's cronies announced with great pomp and self importance. At once an aisle formed down the center of the room, and everyone fell to one knee to pay homage to the emperor. Vader was glad his wife had left when she had, for he would have hated for her to be forced to endure this thinly disguised form of servitude.

Palpatine shuffled slowly down the aisle, bestowing his magnificence on all his adoring subjects. Vader was among the last he greeted.

"I trust you will have that report for me very soon, Lord Vader," he said.

"Yes Master," Vader replied. "I shall make it my first priority."

"See that you do," Palpatine responded sourly, and then shuffled on out the door.

Vader rose slowly, the pain in his knee jarring him as it always did when he knelt. As he did so, Padmé reappeared, her timing impeccable.

"You missed the grand exit," Vader told her dryly.

"And more broken hearted I could not be," she assured him.

"Yes, I'm sure of it," he replied. "Do you want to go home?"

"Yes," she replied at once. "I hate parties like this."

"So do I," he responded. "Let's go."

A short time later, a valet was holding open the speeder door for Padmé as Vader took the seat behind the controls. They sped off and set course for home, a fair distance away.

"So was my performance adequate?" Padmé asked him as they flew along.

"It was," he assured her. "Palpatine can rest assured that our relationship is a disaster."

"Such a hateful man," she said with a frown. 'To feed off of the suffering of others so greedily.' She hesitated before asking him the question she'd wanted to for the past two hours. "Is what he said about you true?" she asked.

"You'll have to be more specific," he replied.

"What he said about you... being unable to... you know... father another child," she said.

"I didn't realize you wanted another child," he commented dryly.

"You know what I'm asking," she responded, feeling her face grow warm with embarrassment.

Vader nodded. "I believe I do," he replied. "And the answer to that is no, it isn't true."

Padmé felt greatly relieved to hear this for some reason, but his response only created another question in her mind. "Okay," she said. "Can I ask how you know?"

"What do you mean, how do I know?" he asked.

"I mean, have you had... occasion to... well... use your... I mean..." she stammered, grasping for the right words.

"If you are asking if I have engaged in sexual relations since we've been apart, the answer is no," he responded. "As to how I know I am still capable of such relations, I am assuming that if the equipment still works then I am still capable."

"You know it works?"

"Yes."

"How?"

Vader was growing tired of her interrogation, and decided to shock her into silence. He turned to her briefly. "Because I dream about you nearly every night and wake up in a state of...frustration," he told her, enjoying the shock he felt from her. But he sensed more than that, something far more interesting.

"Is that true?" she asked quietly, his words starting to create warmth deep within her. "You dream of me and get...excited?"

Vader looked at her. "I look at you and get excited," he told her. "That dress you're wearing... I've been frustrated all evening just looking at you in it."

Padmé felt the warmth spreading through her. "You mean... right now... you're... well... you know..."

"Yes," he told her, returning his attention to flying, which was getting rather difficult to do, "I am."

Padmé looked him up and down, but in the elaborate costume he wore there was no way to know if he was telling the truth. She summoned her nerve and decided to call his bluff. "Prove it," she said simply.

"Prove it??" he asked incredulously, unnerved that he hadn't seen this coming.

"Yes," she said. "Prove it."

Vader hesitated. They were in a moving vehicle, in public, with plenty of other speeders passing them by. But it was dark, and, more importantly, he'd never been able to resist calling her bluff. "You're starting down a dangerous path," he warned her.

"Oh I know exactly what I'm doing," she told him. "You need this as much as I do," she added, reaching over to touch him....

Later on, in Vader's office...

"I never imagined we could do that," Padmé told Vader as she sat on his lap.

Vader shook his head. "No," he told her. "Neither did I. I didn't think you'd want me... I didn't think you wanted me at all."

"I didn't think you wanted me," she told him with a smile.

Vader nodded, and tried to fight the weakness he felt stealing over him.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“I will be,” he told her. “My cardio-vascular system isn’t what it once was,” he added.

“I know,” she replied with a frown. She felt badly for a moment, wondering if she’d pushed him too far. ‘I’m sorry if this wasn’t the best thing for you,’ she said. “It’s just that...”

“No, do *not* apologize,” he told her vehemently, taking her face in his hand. ‘My situation is of my own doing. What we shared tonight was incredible,’ he told her, stroking her face gently. “I have absolutely no regrets. Do you?”

Padmé shook her head. “No,” she replied at once. “None.”

“Good,” he said. “Then... perhaps we can do this again,” he suggested hopefully.

Padmé smiled. “Oh absolutely,” she told him. “Now that I know you’re fully functional, you’ll have to fight me off,” she added.

Vader smiled under his mask. “That would not be in my best interest, now, would it?” he teased.

“Nor mine,” she said. ‘I think you need to get some rest,’ she told him. “I think I wore you out.”

Vader stood. “You did indeed,” he told her. “But it was worth it,” he added, touching her face.

Padmé smiled. “Goodnight,” she told him.

“Goodnight,” he replied. He watched her leave, and then sat down once more, far more exhausted than he’d let on. *This has to work*, he reflected, thinking back to his recent discovery on Kamino. *I cannot live as half a person any longer.*

Chapter 45

Forty-five

Padmé returned to her room and walked over to the dressing table to take what was left of the pins out of her hair. She was shocked by her reflection, for she looked different somehow. Gone were the tension lines that seemed to be present between her eyes so often lately. Her hair was a disheveled mess, and there was a glow to her face that hadn't been there in a very long time. *Looks like I needed that*, she thought with a smile.

Padmé pulled off her gown, deciding she'd need to get it sent off to a discreet seamstress before Leia saw it and started asking questions. She'd had a woman who'd done repairs for her years ago, who never questioned the state of the garments Padmé would bring her. *I wonder if she's still in business*; she mused as she shoved the gown into the back of a closet for now. Walking into the fresher, she turned on the shower and then brushed out her hair.

As she stood under the shower, Padmé closed her eyes, her body still tingling from earlier. Had she only complicated things by encouraging this? After all, she and Vader were far from reconciled. There were still many issues that remained unsolved, the most central one being the fact that he was still a Sith and showed no signs of ever being anything but. How could she possibly accept that? *And what if he wants to train Luke and Leia in the ways of the Dark Side?* Vader had assured her that he had plans to deal with the emperor, but that didn't mean he himself didn't have designs on the twins. There was no way Padmé could stand by and allow that to happen. *So why did you just make love with the man? Why did you allow it to go so far?*

Vader had asked her if she'd had any regrets, and her immediate reaction had been no. And, on one level, she had none. The physical need she'd always had for him had never gone away, the ten years apart from him had only made it worse. To deny the sexual chemistry that existed between them, even now, was foolhardy, and had in all likelihood only augmented the level of tension between them. Perhaps a physical relationship would help to alleviate that tension, and pave the way to a more amicable relationship. *You're rationalizing, Padmé*, she told herself. *You needed him...*

Padmé was not alone in her ruminations. Vader too spent some time before falling asleep contemplating what had transpired between them.

The fact that she still wanted him physically still astonished Vader. Padmé had always been a very sensual woman, their physical relationship torrid and dynamic. But after his monstrous actions on Mustafar, he never imagined she'd ever feel anything but hatred for him again. And yet, she had admitted to him that she needed him as much as he needed her. And that was astonishing, especially given the fact that he was half a man now. But there was hope that could change now. It may be months, even a year or more before it happened, but there was at least a chance now: a chance to be whole again. *Will she love me again if I look like him?* He wondered. *Or will our relationship be purely based on physical need, and nothing more?* Vader frowned, berating himself for daring to want more. If all she wanted was physical gratification from him, then that is exactly what he would provide for her. And if he

spent the rest of his life in unrequited love, then he would accept it as just punishment for his past treatment of her.

In his current state of exhaustion, it wasn't long before Vader fell into a rather deep sleep.

"You're pregnant? Are you sure?" Vader asked.

Padmé nodded, looking up at him with concern in her dark eyes. "The doctor contacted me this morning," she told him. "The blood test was positive."

Vader was silent, a mixture of happiness and worry filling him. While he welcomed the thought of becoming a father again, he was very concerned about how the emperor would react. Palpatine had never believed that Luke and Leia were not Force sensitive, despite the blood tests (forgeries, of course) that proved it. Now here was another child of Vader, one who would no doubt be as strong as his or her siblings. Keeping Palpatine away from this child would be very difficult, perhaps impossible. They needed a plan, and they needed one fast.

"Please say something," Padmé said at last.

"We must hide your pregnancy," Vader said at last. "If the emperor finds out, he will try to take the child from us."

Padmé's eyes grew wide with fear. "But he's not even born yet," she protested. "How could he possibly do that!?"

"He'd find a way," Vader insisted. "I know my master well, Padmé. And I know for certain that he would stop at nothing to get his hands on our child."

"What should we do?" she asked quietly.

"I don't know yet," he told her. "I hate the thought of sending you away, but if it means your safety, there may be no other way."

Padmé's eyes filled with tears. "I'm afraid," she told him. "I don't want to be separated from Luke and Leia, from you," she told him.

"I know," he replied, touching her face. "If there was another way, I would do it. But I won't let him harm you, Padmé; you or our child."

Padmé was about to respond when the door to Vader's office opened and a group of red-robed Imperial guards filed into the room at a brisk pace, each of them armed with a lethal Force pike.

Vader stood up, shielding Padmé from them when he saw Palpatine step into the doorway.

"I understand congratulations are in order," Palpatine said with a sinister smile. "Why Lord Vader, I didn't think you had it in you."

"What do you want?" Vader demanded.

"Just a small thing," Palpatine replied. "The child your wife carries."

Vader awoke at this point, utterly relieved to realize that he had been dreaming. But was it a dream? Or a portent of things to come? Had he and Padmé's moment of passion resulted in a child? Cold fear began to spread through Vader. For as much as he would love Padmé to

give him another child, so long as Palpatine lived, any child she bore him would be in danger. *He must die*, Vader decided, *soon*. He realized that in his present physical state he stood a good chance of dying should he confront Palpatine. And while death did not frighten him, the thought of leaving Padmé and their children alone in the galaxy did. No, he needed to be whole again before he could safely and successfully destroy Palpatine. *I must return to Kamino as soon as possible*, he decided. *I must start the procedure to become whole again. And then, my master, you will be destroyed.*

The next morning

"How was the party?" Leia asked her mother as they sat eating breakfast.

"It was pretty much as I'd expected it to be," Padmé replied. "The emperor was as vile and loathsome as I remembered him."

"That's not too surprising," Leia replied. "Did you and Dad have any fun at all?"

Padmé smiled as she recalled the unexpected and very passionate encounter she and Vader had shared the previous evening. "Yes, we did," she assured her.

Leia nodded, happy to hear it, and then returned to her breakfast. Padmé looked at her son, who was uncharacteristically quiet this morning.

"Luke? Is something bothering you?" she asked.

Luke looked up at his mother. "No," he lied. "Nothing."

"Yes there is," Leia piped up, able to read her brother easily. "You don't want to go to school, so you?"

"No," Luke admitted glumly.

"Luke, we've been through this," Padmé said. "Leia will be returning tomorrow, but..."

"It's not like that," Luke interjected, looking up at his mother. "There's this kid in our class who's been telling mean jokes. Jokes about farmers."

"So?" Leia asked.

"My Uncle Owen was a farmer!" Luke told her hotly. "And now everybody's calling everybody they think is stupid a farmer! Uncle Owen was one of the smartest people I ever knew! He could add and multiply big numbers in his head like nothing!"

Padmé was wondering when Luke's deep seated guilt over his guardians' death would resurface. He'd adjusted so well to his new life, as had both of them; she knew it was only a matter of time before the other shoe dropped. "Luke, these boys didn't know your uncle," Padmé explained gently. "If they had, they would never have started this. You have to understand that..."

"I don't want to back to that school," he told her, his eyes welling up with tears. "I don't belong there. I'm a farmer too, after all," he said. "They're all a bunch of snobs that don't care about people who don't have as much money as they do. Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru didn't have lots of money, but they worked so hard to give me things, and they let me come here on a trip even though I knew they were afraid. And they died because of it, because of me!"

Vader entered the room at this point.

"Good morning," he said, running one hand lightly over Padmé's shoulders as he passed behind her. When he sensed the tension, however, he stopped in his tracks. "What's wrong?"

Padmé looked up at him and then back at Luke. "Luke's been having some problems with some kids at school," she told Vader.

"Problems? What kind of problems? With who??" Vader demanded.

"One of the other boys started telling jokes about farmers," Padmé explained. "And Luke finds them offensive because of his uncle."

"Uncle Owen was a farmer," Luke explained to his father. "Hearing those jokes makes me feel guilty, like I'm betraying him."

"Why do you feel you're betraying him?" Vader asked as he took a seat at the table. "It is not you who is telling those jokes."

"No," Luke replied. "It isn't. But some of those kids are my friends, Dad. How can I be friends with them if they're so mean?"

"Have you told them how you feel, Luke?" Padmé asked. "If they knew how you felt, maybe they'd stop telling those jokes."

"No," Luke replied. "They'd just start making fun of me because I was a farmer too," he explained glumly.

"No they wouldn't," Leia spoke up. "They're not bad kids, Luke, you know that. They're just... dumb. Ignorant. If you told them about your uncle, and how amazing he was, they'd see farmers in a totally different light."

"Leia makes a good point, Luke," Padmé said. "Ignorance often leads to cruelty, and the only way to combat ignorance is through education. You need to tell them about being a farmer, and how hard it is, and what a remarkable person your uncle was. I'm sure they'll change their tune."

"And if they don't, you will tell me at once," Vader added. "I'll make sure they change it."

Padmé looked at him with a shake of her head. "We're talking about kids, remember?"

Vader said nothing, but his children both had the distinct impression that he was smiling under his mask. Both Luke and Leia had noted what a good mood their father seemed to be in this morning, and how relaxed he seemed. And the fact that he'd touched their mother's shoulder as he walked past her had not gone unnoticed by either of them. The twins looked at one another and asked *what's going on with them?*

"So who's coming to school today?" Han Solo asked as he entered the room. "Do I have any takers?"

"I'm coming," Leia said, standing up. "The droid said I could if I wanted to today," she explained to her parents.

"Are you sure, Leia?" Padmé asked. "It hasn't been three days yet."

"I know," Leia replied. "I feel fine, Mom, really."

"Just as stubborn as her mother," Vader remarked.

Han smirked. "What about you, kid? You coming?"

Luke nodded. "Yeah, I'm coming," he said standing up. He looked back at his parents. 'Thanks Mom,' he said. "Thanks Dad. I think I will talk to those boys."

"An excellent idea," Vader replied.

"Good luck," Padmé added.

Luke smiled, and then left the room to join his sister.

Chapter 46

AN — the first portion of this post is the rest of chapter 45. I don't know why it was cut off, and I thank Darth Caedus for pointing it out to me. The subsequent chapter follows. My apologies for the confusion.

"You handled that very well," Vader told his wife after the children had left for school.

"Thank you," Padmé replied.

"I thought that Luke had overcome his sense of loss," Vader told her. "He seemed to have adjusted so well to his new life."

"He has," she agreed. 'But it hasn't been that long, really,' she reminded him. "It must have been very traumatic for him, losing his guardians that way."

"Yes, it was," Vader agreed. 'I'm sure he'll sort out those boys at school,' he assured her. "He lived on Tatooine. That has a way of toughening up a boy."

"Yes, that's certainly true," Padmé agreed. "I suppose Obi-Wan took him there after..." she stopped, still unable to think of that day without growing emotional.

"After stealing him from you," Vader finished for her. "He will pay for his treachery one day, I promise you," he added.

Padmé nodded. "I don't want to think about him," she said quietly. "It only makes me angry to think of what he and Bail did to me. To both of us."

Vader nodded in agreement. "Right now I'm more concerned with the emperor," he told her. "He is not going to let up on this blood test issue until I give him documented proof of my claim."

Padmé frowned. "But how will you do that when both the twins are Force sensitive?" she asked.

"Forgeries," he told her. "Blood tests from someone other than Luke and Leia," he explained.

"Will that fool him?" she asked doubtfully.

"Not indefinitely," he admitted. "But it will buy me some time."

"Time for what?" Padmé asked. "Do you have a plan?"

Vader had not wanted to tell Padmé about what he had learned on Kamino, but perhaps it was unavoidable. "Yes," he told her.

"But what I have planned will take months to accomplish."

"Months? What is it?" she asked.

“While I was on Kamino I learned that they have recently perfected a surgical method of replicating organ tissue,” he told her.

Padmé’s eyes widened upon hearing this. “You mean... you think they can help you?”

“They can,” he assured her. “I’ve already asked them.”

“That’s wonderful!” she exclaimed.

Vader nodded. “Unfortunately the replication process is a lengthy one,” he told her.

“So what you plan to do is confront Palpatine once you’ve had the surgery to repair your injuries,” Padmé said.

“Yes,” he replied. “In my current physical state I am not confident that I could defeat him. And I won’t risk doing so and leaving you and the twins alone.”

A cold feeling of terror filled Padmé at the thought of being alone in the galaxy without Vader to protect her and their children from the emperor. “And you’re confident you can if this surgery is successful?” she asked.

“Yes,” Vader assured her. “Before Mustafar I was stronger than him, I’m sure of it. He knew it too. But when I was injured, when half of my body was replaced with prosthetics, much of my power was lost.”

Padmé nodded in understanding. “Have they begun the replication?” she asked.

“No, unfortunately it would have required me to stay forty-eight hours,” he told her. “And I needed to be back here.”

“For the party,” she added.

“Yes,” he replied. He was silent for a moment as he reflected back on the previous night. “A party which turned out to be far more...stimulating than I’d anticipated,” he added.

Padmé smiled, feeling her face grow warm. “It was,” she agreed. “I’ve always heard that the after parties are where the real action takes place,” she told him.

“Yes, I’ve heard the same thing,” he responded. “I suppose we proved that theory to be true.”

“I’d say so,” she agreed, feeling the warmth spreading through her as she thought about their tryst the previous night.

“Do you have a meeting to go to this morning?” she asked him.

“No,” he told her. “Why do you ask?”

“Well, it’s just that, the kids are gone for several hours,” she told him with a smile. “And we’re all alone.”

Vader nodded. “Indeed, we are,” he agreed, feeling himself growing excited by the thoughts popping into her mind. “Did you have an idea about how to spend the morning?” he asked.

“Yes,” she told him. “That is, if you’re interested,” she asked.

“Very interested,” he replied, standing up. He held out a hand to her. “You realize that this could easily become habit forming,” he told her as she stood up.

“Well the way I see it, we have ten years of catching up to do,” she told him.

“That is a great deal of catching up,” he said, running his hands up the length of her arms.

“Yes it is,” she agreed, looking up at him. “We’re going to be busy,” she told him.

“Very busy,” he agreed, taking her face in his hands. ‘I want to kiss you,’ he told her. “I want so much to taste you,” he added, running his hands into her hair.

“One day,” she told him. “It will happen,” she assured him.

“But not for months,” he replied in frustration.

Padmé nodded. “Well, perhaps there is a way,” she said. “You told me you could take your mask off in a specialized environment.”

“The hyperbaric chamber,” he told her.

“Can we... I mean, is it safe if I...” she asked tentatively.

“It is,” he said, taking her by the hand. “I promise you. Come with me,” he said, leading her out of the room.

Vader lead her to his quarters, the thoughts of Padmé seeing his face unmasked making him apprehensive.

“Before we do this,” he told her as they reached the hyperbaric chamber, “I need to tell you that I don’t look the way you remember me,” he told her.

Padmé looked up at him. “I know that,” she told him. “I don’t care what you look like,” she added.

Vader activated the pod. “You may change your mind when you see me,” he told her.

Padmé could see how apprehensive he was, and stopped. “If this makes you uneasy, then we don’t have to... I mean, we could go somewhere else if it would make you feel better.”

Vader was torn, for as much as he dreaded her reaction to seeing him unmasked, he wanted very much to see her with his own eyes, to smell the scent of her skin, to kiss her.

“No,” he said at last. ‘This is who I am now, Padmé,’ he told her. “If we’re to be lovers again, then you need to see the way I am now.”

Padmé nodded, the thought of seeing his face both exciting her and making her fearful. Anakin had always been so handsome; no doubt the fires of Mustafar had marred his face terribly. “I agree,” she said at last. “I’m ready,” she assured him.

“So am I,” he told her, “more than ready,” he added, stepping into the pod. She stepped in behind him, and watched as he sat down and activated the claw like device above him. Padmé could feel her heart pounding inside of her as she watched the device attach itself to his helmet and then retract, taking the helmet and the top portion of his mask with it.

The first thing she noticed was the sadness in his eyes, eyes which had not changed at all. His beautiful golden hair was all gone, and his skin, which she'd always remembered being tanned, was very pale.

"Please say something," he said finally.

She wasn't sure what to say, but knew he needed to hear her assurances. "Does this part come off?" she asked, touching the bottom part of his mask.

"Yes," he told her, 'but it requires some...' "he stopped as she began to look for a way to remove it." Here, he told her, "help me."

Padmé followed his lead and soon the bottom portion of the mask came loose enough to pull away.

"You're free," she told him.

Vader nodded, his eyes looking her over avidly. "You're far more beautiful without the mask," told her.

Padmé smiled. "So are you," she told him, taking his face in her hands. She brought her mouth to his, gently, tenderly, almost as though she was afraid to kiss him. He sensed her apprehension, and took her face in his hands and deepened their kiss. Padmé was surprised by the ardor of his kiss, and was soon kissing him back with equal enthusiasm. Padmé sighed as she felt his mouth move to her throat next.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered in her ear, his voice hoarse and throaty without the vocabulator. He ran his hands down the sides of her body as the hyperbaric chamber slowly closed over them.

Later that morning

"Milady, there is someone who wishes to see you," Threepio informed Padmé as she appeared in the corridor outside of Vader's quarters.

She frowned. "Who is it?" she asked. "I was just going to have a shower."

"It's Queen Breha of Organa," Threepio replied. "She said it was quite urgent."

Padmé sighed, and looked down at her clothes. While they weren't ripped this time, they did look a little... rumpled. "Show her into the office," she told the droid. "I'll be there in ten minutes."

"Very good, Milady," Threepio replied and walked away to comply.

Padmé had looked for Breha the previous night, but had not seen her, and had simply assumed that she had not made the trip to Coruscant with her husband. And now here she was. *What does she want?* Padmé wondered as she entered her quarters to get cleaned up. A sinking feeling started blossoming within her as she started to realize why Breha was here. *She wants to see Leia,* she reasoned. *She's here to visit Leia.*

Vader remained in his hyperbaric chamber for a long time after Padmé had left him. It frustrated him greatly that making love to his wife was so taxing physically now, and he had done his best to hide this from Padmé. The last thing he wanted was to make her feel as

though she was endangering him by wanting him sexually. *This will not be forever*, he reminded himself. It was beyond his wildest imaginings that they had made love not once but twice within the past twelve hours, and he was once again reminded that he needed to bring up the issue of birth control. While both he and Padmé were young enough to have more children, so long as the emperor lived they weren't even consider it.

Noticing that there was a new set of messages awaiting his perusal, Vader opened the comm to view them. Most of them were routine reports, which he scanned over briefly before deleting. The last one he saw was from a person he didn't know, and he took his time to read it through. As he did so, he grew more and more angry. *I love you, Padmé, but you should not have interfered.*

With that thought in mind, he replaced his mask and helmet, and then left the chamber to go and look for his wife.

Forty-six

"What are you doing here, Breha?"

Breha stood up and turned to Padmé, taken aback by her lack of warmth. "I... I was just hoping we could talk," Breha replied. "When I heard that you were living here, that you were living as Vader's wife, I was concerned."

"There's no need to be," Padmé said, sitting down.

Breha sat down once more and looked at Padmé, trying to determine if she ought to speak her mind. "You look wonderful," she said finally, smiling nervously.

"Thank you," Padmé replied. "I didn't see you at the party last night."

"No, I didn't go," Breha replied. "I had a terrible headache, and wasn't up to the crowds."

"What a shame," Padmé replied. "What is it you wanted to talk about?" she asked finally, growing tired of the small talk.

"Well as I said, I was concerned when I heard that you were with Vader," she replied. "How did it happen? He isn't holding you prisoner here, is he?"

Padmé frowned. "Is that what your husband told you?" she asked.

"No, although he did tell me that there was a rather ugly scene at the party last night," Breha replied. "I have to say I was rather shocked that you'd humiliate a former colleague like that in public, Padmé," she remarked.

"Bail lied to me and stole my daughter from me," Padmé replied tersely. "If anything he got off lightly. If Leia's father had his way, Bail would be dead right now."

Breha frowned. "Yes, you're right," she admitted.

"Look, if you've come here to try and make me feel guilty for speaking my mind to your husband, then you're wasting your time," Padmé said irritably. "Maybe you ought to leave."

"No, that isn't why I'm here," Breha said. "I'm sorry... I suppose I'm just... nervous."
"Why?" Padmé asked.

“What is she doing here?”

Both women turned to the doorway where Vader now stood, staring ominously at Breha.

“I’m trying to determine that,” Padmé replied, turning back to Breha. “What is it you want of me?” she asked.

Breha was silent for a moment as she tried to summon her courage. Vader’s presence was making that rather difficult. “It’s... it’s about Leia,” she said finally.

“What about her?” Vader demanded.

“Please,” Breha pleaded, looking back at Padmé, trying to appeal to her. “I would like to see her, just to say hello. I miss her so much,” she continued, her eyes filling with tears.

“Out of the question,” Vader stated flatly. “Now get out.”

“Surely you can understand,” she said to Padmé. “You’re a mother; you must know how I feel! I love Leia so much! Won’t you please just ask her if...”

“I believe you heard my husband,” Padmé said. “It would only confuse Leia to see you now. She has adjusted very well to her new life; I won’t allow you to jeopardize that by creating conflicting emotions in her now.”

“But she’s my baby!” Breha implored. “I raised her since she was a tiny infant! Surely I have the right to at least...”

“You have no rights!” Vader shouted angrily. “How dare you assume such a thing? You stole our child and lied to her all her life, and that gives you *rights*?! Get out now while you can still leave under your own power!”

Breha stood up hastily and ran out of the room, terrified and humiliated.

Padmé sighed, feeling terribly upset by the ugly confrontation. “That was unpleasant,” she commented.

Vader nodded, trying to master his anger before he spoke to his wife about what was on his mind. “Her audacity is staggering,” he replied. “I don’t want either of them anywhere near Leia,” he added.

“No, neither do I,” Padmé agreed.

“There is something I need to discuss with you,” Vader told her.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I received a message from the wife of Argus Fidar,” he told her. “He was the first foreman in charge of putting in the pool,” he explained.

“I remember the name,” she told him. “What did she say? Did she receive my package?”

“Yes she did,” Vader replied. “And was expressing her thanks for it.”

“That’s nice,” Padmé said. “I’m glad she found it useful.”

“I’m sure what you did seemed like a good idea, but I must insist that you never do such a thing again,” Vader told her.

Padmé frowned. “Why not?” she demanded.

Vader walked across the room as he formulated his response carefully. “By providing compensation to this woman, you have, in essence, undermined my authority,” he explained.

“How?”

“Because such compensation is like an apology,” he told her. “And since you are my wife, it is like me apologizing for doing what I did.”

“I see,” Padmé replied, his words troubling her. “So... providing for a widowed mother of three is not as important as your image? Is that what you’re saying?” she challenged.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying,” he retorted. “I’m saying that when you send care packages to the family of someone I have disciplined, it negates the discipline and...”

“Discipline?” she asked, standing up to face him. “Discipline is meant to correct inappropriate behavior. How can someone who is dead learn anything?” she demanded.

“You are being deliberately argumentative,” he retorted. “As I told you last night, this is who I am, Padmé, like it or not.”

“Well I don’t like it,” she retorted. ‘I don’t like cruelty for the sake of cruelty,’ she continued angrily. “I don’t believe in taking a life to make a point,” she added. “And if that’s who you are and what you’re about, then perhaps last night was a big mistake!”

“Perhaps it was!” Vader replied angrily. “Although it seems strange that you only feel this way now that you’ve seen my face,” he commented hotly.

“What are you trying to insinuate?” she demanded.

“Only that perhaps it was a mistake to believe you when you told me that you didn’t care what I looked like now,” he said, jumping wildly to conclusions. “Since now that you have you’re having second thoughts about being my lover.”

“You really think I’m that shallow?” she asked him. “That I care about what you look like?? All I care about is what is on the inside, and I can’t say that I do when you are so cruel without a second thought.”

“I’ve made no effort to hide who and what I am,” he countered. “But I assumed since it was you who seduced me on both occasions that you had accepted who I was.”

“I seduced you!?” she cried.

“What else would you call it when you go down on me in a moving vehicle?” he countered.

“You didn’t seem to mind at the time,” she pointed out.

“I didn’t,” he countered. “But if you expect me to change just because we’re having sex, then you are deluding yourself.”

His words were spoken in anger, and he regretted them almost immediately upon seeing the hurt in her eyes.

"I suppose I thought of it as more than sex," she told him quietly. "And that was foolish of me. But don't worry, I won't throw myself at you again," she assured him and turned to leave the room.

Vader let her leave, his fists clenched tightly in frustration. And then he left, determined not to return until he had her out of his system.

Later that day

Captain Kassel knew better than to make small talk with Vader most of the time, but in this particular instance, he felt certain that doing so could very well cost him his life. In the three years since he'd been in Vader's employ, the captain had come to know his commander's moods quite well. The fact that there were only a few of them made it somewhat easier. But that had changed when Vader's family had come into his life. Since then, Kassel had seen the normally sullen dark lord actually in a good mood, happy, and on occasion, crack jokes. But today was not one of those days. Today Vader was in a very foul mood. Kassel guessed that it was because of his wife, but knew better than to ask.

"I wasn't aware of a mission, sir," Kassel said tentatively. "Do you know how long you'll be gone?"

"No," was Vader's curt reply.

Kassel nodded. "Will you let me know when you find out?" he asked. "I'm sure Lady Vader will ask."

"Don't count on it," Vader muttered.

Kassel said no more, knowing that his hunch was right, and they flew the rest of the way to the *Exactor* in silence.

Veslack Academy

Padmé left the speeder and walked to the security gate to wait for Luke and Leia. She had not seen Vader for the rest of the day, and for that she was grateful. She felt embarrassed that she'd initiated sex with him not once, but twice. Embarrassed and foolish. *Well it won't happen again*, she vowed. *I won't let him hurt me again*.

"Hi Mom!" the twins shouted as they saw her waiting for them. Luke ran over to her and gave her a hug as Leia walked along behind, ever the princess.

"How was your day?" Padmé asked, putting an arm around each of them as they walked to the speeder.

"Great, Mom," Luke said. "I talked to the guys about Uncle Owen, and you know what? They think moisture farming's cool!!"

Padmé smiled. "That's wonderful," she told him.

"Mom, you okay?" Leia asked, who had been observing her mother.

Padmé turned to Leia as they reached the speeder. "Yes, why do you ask?" she asked.

Leia frowned. "You don't seem okay," she replied. But she said nothing more, knowing her mother wouldn't want Han Solo to suspect that her parents were fighting again.

"You and Dad had a fight, didn't you?" Leia asked her mother once they were alone back home.

"Is it that obvious?" Padmé asked.

"Yeah," Luke replied, tossing his haversack on his bed. "Really obvious."

"What happened?" Leia asked. "You two seemed so happy this morning, like you really connected at that party last night."

Padmé smiled at the child's innocent comment. "We did," she replied. "But just because we did doesn't mean things are perfect between us. Far from it, I'm afraid."

"Where is Dad anyway?" Luke asked.

"I don't know," Padmé replied. "I haven't seen him since this morning. Perhaps Captain Kassel can tell you."

"Why don't you just use your comlink Dad gave you to find him?" Leia suggested.

Padmé remained silent for a moment, not wanting to admit to her children just how bitter she really was. "I don't want to disturb him," she replied simply.

Luke and Leia looked at one another, neither of them having a clue how to interpret their mother's seemingly innocuous comment.

"Come on," she said finally. "Get your homework done. We're going out to dinner tonight."

"Really?!" Leia exclaimed. "That's awesome! I thought Dad didn't like to go out."

"He doesn't," Padmé replied. "That's why it will just be the three of us."

"Don't you mean the four of us?" Luke reminded her. "We never go anywhere without Han."

Padmé sighed. "Ah yes, Han," she replied. "How could I forget him? You know, just for once I'd like to go somewhere without him," she said.

The twins were shocked to hear it. "Really Mom?" Leia asked. "You mean it?"

"Yes I do," she replied. "It's no secret anymore that I'm your mother," she said.

"Dad will be mad when he finds out," Luke pointed out.

"Let him be," Padmé replied. 'He's more than welcome to come along if he is so concerned,' she added, knowing full well that he would no even consider it. "Besides, I need to go to the shop where he bought all those gowns," she told them.

"You're getting more?" Leia asked.

Padmé shook her head. "Not exactly," she replied. 'Get to that homework,' she said, walking to the door. "We'll go in an hour or so."

Kassel was just stepping off the lift when Padmé appeared in the corridor.

"Milady!" he called, jogging down to meet her. "I need to talk to you."

“Good,” Padmé said, “I need to talk to you too. Come with me.”

“Yes M’am,” he said, falling into step beside her. “Lord Vader wanted me to let you know that he’s gone away on a mission,” he said, bracing himself for her reaction. Surprisingly he received very little.

“I see,” she said, not at all surprised that he’d left. ‘I have some items I need returned to the shops in town,’ she told him as she entered her quarters. “I want you to take care of it,” she added.

“Yes Milady,” Kassel said, already selecting who he’d delegate this task to. “Store credit?”

“No,” Padmé said. “I want the money, and then i want you to send it to this address,” she said, handing him a datacard.

Kassel looked down at the card, having no idea who this woman was or why Padmé was sending her money. But he also knew that questioning Lady Vader’s motives was almost as foolhardy as questioning those of her husband. “I’ll make sure it gets sent there today,” he assured her. “Anything else?”

Padmé nodded, walking over to her dressing table. She pulled out the velvet box that held the precious onyx pendant Vader had presented her the previous night. “Take this too,” she told him, handing him the box. “I’m sure it’s worth a great deal.”

Kassel nodded, taking the box.

“I’m taking the twins out for dinner tonight,” she told him. “I’d like to go alone,” she added.

Kassel frowned. “Milady, you know how Lord Vader feels about you going anywhere unescorted,” he told her.

“Yes i do,” she replied. “But I’m not terribly concerned about how he feels right now,” she told him.

“Uh... okay,” Kassel replied, feeling incredibly awkward. “But if i let you leave alone, he’ll kick my a... he’ll be really angry with me.”

Padmé hadn’t considered that. “Yes, you’re right,” she said, not wanting to be responsible for the man’s life. ‘Very well,’ she sighed. “I’ll bring Han along with us,” she told him. “Satisfied?”

Kassel smiled. “Thanks Milady,” he replied. “I’ll let Han know right away.”

Padmé nodded, and then sat down on the edge of her bed as he left. *So he’s gone*, she thought, shocking herself with how upset this thought made her. *It’s probably for the best this way*, she reasoned, fighting the tears that threatened when she thought about the fight they’d had earlier.

Star Destroyer Exactor

It wasn’t long before the entire crew knew what a foul mood their commander was in, and the word spread quickly to stay out of Vader’s way. That suited Vader just fine, for he was in no mood to speak to anyone. Having instructed the ship’s captain to set a course for Kamino,

Vader retreated into the sanctuary of his private quarters to brood. *I never should have let things get so far*, he chastised himself. *But how could I resist her?* He had never been able to resist Padmé. She'd been a fire in his blood for as long as he'd known her. *And you think you'll get her out of your system just by staying away? You were away from her for ten years and you still dreamed of her every night... and now that you've had her again, there's no way you'll ever get her out of your system.*

Vader activated the comscreen in his quarters to check his messages, half expecting there to be one from his wife; half hoping there'd be one. But there wasn't. Instead there was a message from the gown shop where Vader had spent a small fortune recently. Vader read the message over twice, not understanding what it meant: *Lord Vader, we are deeply sorry that your recent purchases did not meet with your expectations. However, we were only too happy to give you a full refund. If there is anything we can do for you in the future, please do not hesitate to contact us, and we will do our utmost to ensure that your needs are met. Thank you once more for your patronage. The owners of Jenner's Boutique.*

"What the devil are they talking about?" Vader muttered. "I haven't returned anything..." and then he realized what had happened. Padmé had returned the gowns he'd bought. *You've really pissed her off this time*, he thought in frustration. He deleted the message and continued to scroll down, skimming over the rest, his mind never straying far from his wife and the mess he'd made of things with her.

Coruscant

Han Solo tugged uneasily at his collar once more as he sat at a table with Padmé and her children. They were in one of the city's finest restaurants, Padmé having chosen it since the security there was known to be tight. Han had never been comfortable in posh places, and this one was no exception. He took some comfort knowing that Luke was just as uncomfortable as he was.

"How's that steak treating you, Kid?" Han asked Luke.

"It's good," Luke said. He'd learned as a very young child to eat whatever was put in front of him, and not to complain even if he didn't like it. And while he liked the steak, the rather exotic vegetable medley that accompanied it was more than his unsophisticated palate could handle.

"So Lord Vader's gone on a mission?" Han asked Padmé.

"Yes, apparently," she replied nonchalantly.

"Where did he go?" Leia asked. "He didn't even say goodbye," she added, the hurt tone clear in her voice.

"I don't know where he went, sweetheart," Padmé told her daughter. "He didn't tell me."

Luke and Leia looked at one another, knowing that whatever their parents had been fighting about it must have been big.

"Don't worry kids," Han spoke up. "Knowing your Dad he won't be gone long. He loves you guys too much to stay away for too long."

Padmé nodded, knowing that what he said was true. Vader loved Luke and Leia a great deal; but *does he have such feelings for me?* she wondered. *Will he ever again?*

“Is there anything else I can get you, Lady Vader?” the maître d’ asked, appearing at her side.

Padmé looked at the twins. “Probably a dessert menu,” she said. When the twins nodded enthusiastically, she smiled. “Make it two.”

Chapter 47

Forty-seven

Coruscant

It was very late when Padmé finally got the twins to bed. She allowed them to stay up later than normal than usual simply because she didn't want to be alone. Being alone enabled her to think too much, and right now that was not a good idea. She hadn't wanted to dwell on the ugly confrontation she'd had with Vader earlier, mere hours after they'd made love. *No, it wasn't making love; it was sex, pure and simple, at least for him it was...* His words were still fresh in his mind, words that had cut right through her: *if you think I'm going to change just because we're having sex than you're deluding yourself...* Anakin would never say such a thing; he would never even think it. But Darth Vader would. And despite everything that had happened between them after the party, he was still very much Darth Vader. *And you're a fool to think that he'll ever be anyone but,* she told herself bitterly.

"Is there anything I can get for you before I shut down for the night, Lady Vader?" Threepio asked when he found Padmé in the living room.

"Threepio, I've asked you not to call me that," Padmé said tiredly.

"My apologies," the droid replied. "What should I call you?"

"Padmé," she told him. "That's my name."

"Oh," Threepio replied. "Is there anything I can get for you before I shut down for the night, Miss Padmé?"

"No, thank you," she replied, picking up the remote and turning on the holoreceiver. "Goodnight Threepio."

"Goodnight Miss Padmé."

Padmé flipped through the frequencies, trying to find something to watch that would distract her even for a little while. But aside from the news, there was very little on that could hold her interest for more than a few seconds. Finally she decided to watch the news, keeping in mind that virtually everything they reported was skewed and censored. She had only watched ten minutes of a rather boring financial report when she drifted off to sleep.

Padmé continued to channel surf until she came upon what appeared to be a live feed from the inside of a star destroyer. Curious, she left it, wondering if she'd stumbled across a very well made holodrama or an actual feed.. But since when does the Empire broadcast from inside its navy vessels? Was this somehow a breach of security she was witnessing? Or was it perhaps a frequency only Vader had access to, being the commander of the fleet? Whatever the reason, Padmé found herself fascinated and watched as the officers and crew of the ship moved about the bridge with efficiency and purpose. Clearly whoever was the commander of this vessel ran a tight ship, for there was no sign of lollygagging or shirking whatsoever. And then the commander of the vessel entered the bridge, and Padmé sat up when she saw who it

was: Darth Vader. She watched with mixed emotions as he moved around the bridge, seeing the faces of the men he commanded grow fearful as he drew closer. He stopped at one station, where a young officer, no older than Han Solo, seemed to be trying to correct an error he'd made on his instrument panel. Padmé watched in horror as Vader grabbed the man by the throat and lifted him from his seat, shaking him violently as he berated him for doing such a poor job. The man soon expired, his face purple and bloated, and Vader tossed the dead body to the deck and moved on to the next station. Padmé's hands were shaking as she tried to turn off the receiver, but the remote refused to operate. She tried to stand up to leave the room, to get away from the horrible images, but her legs refused to work. Finally she simply covered her eyes, refusing to watch anymore, but still able to hear what was going on. She heard the voice of a woman this time, an officer perhaps, speaking to Vader. But the conversation that ensued between them had nothing to do with the running of the ship. Padmé opened her eyes and noticed that it was no longer the bridge she was observing, it appeared to be the inside of an officers' quarters. She watched in shock as the woman proceeded to disrobe in front of Vader, who sat and watched her for a moment before standing up and walking over to her. In a moment she was in his arms...

Padmé awoke at this point, her mind refusing to watch any more of the disturbing dream. She sat up on the sofa and looked at the screen, which was now showing a rather tawdry holovid. Padmé turned it off at once and ran her hands through her tousled hair. *Why can't I just put him out of my mind?* She thought in frustration. *Had there been other women in the past ten years?* She wondered anxiously; *had he lied about that? Ten years is a long time for a man to go without sex*, she realized. *A long time for anyone...* She thought back to the many nights she'd awoken from dreams of Anakin in a state of utter frustration, her need for him almost painful. *But I never considered being with another man*, she remembered, not that there had been many in the abbey where she'd stayed. But even if there had been, there was no doubt in her mind that she'd never have considered doing such a thing. But Vader had believed her dead for ten years; had he had dalliances? He told her he hadn't, but at that point he was probably ready to tell her anything to get what he wanted from her. *Is he manipulating me? Am I a fool to think he still cares about me?*

Padmé thought back to the conversation she'd had with her sister a couple of days earlier. Sola had stated her rather considered opinion of the situation quite emphatically. *What would she think now if she knew that I'd had sex with him? Twice??* Sola had always been a person Padmé felt she could talk to about anything; was that still true? *There's only one way to find out*, she reasoned. Smoothing down her hair, she walked over to the office and opened a comm channel to Naboo. Her sister would more than likely be at work at this time of the day, but she had always been very good at checking her messages. Padmé was hopeful that this hadn't changed, and that Sola would consider her invitation to come and visit her. The fact that Vader was away indefinitely would hopefully make the offer more appealing to Sola. Leaving a message in her sister's inbox, Padmé stood up with a yawn and decided to go to bed, hopefully this time to sleep without dreaming of Darth Vader.

Kamino

If Darth Vader had known that his wife was concerned about him being unfaithful to her, he may have laughed. That is, if he weren't in so much pain.

The physicians had warned him that the procedure to harvest cell samples from him would be painful, but he'd had no idea the degree of pain they had meant. Until now.

Vader was in a recovery room, hooked up to a ventilator as the sedatives started to wear off. And as they did, he began to feel as though his body was on fire. And he knew exactly what that felt like. Only this time the pain was inside as well as outside. *But it will all be worth it in the end*, he told himself, summoning the Dark Side to tolerate the pain; *in the end you'll be whole again*.

That was his hope, at least. After his initial examination, the doctors had consulted with one another and had only now given him their prognosis. The damage he'd sustained was far more severe than they'd realized. And while they were confident they could regenerate organs and other vital tissues for him, they expressed serious concerns about him being able to survive the arduous task of implanting those new tissues. With his heart and lungs greatly incapacitated, such surgery could be life threatening, placing an extraordinary amount of stress on his already fragile cardio-pulmonary systems.

"Ah, Lord Vader you're awake."

Vader slowly turned his head to look at the doctor who approached him, the pain ricocheting through his skull as he did so.

"Well?" he managed to say, his voice barely a whisper.

"We've managed to collect the cell samples we needed," the doctor told him.

Vader nodded slowly, closing his eyes once more. "And now?" he asked hoarsely.

"Now we will use the cells to regenerate your damaged organs," the physician replied. "The skin will be the fastest organ to regenerate," he went on. "The bones next," he continued.

"When... the surgery..." Vader asked weakly.

"That will depend upon the rate of regeneration," the physician told him. "In general with human organs it takes months, but there are always many factors to consider."

Vader wasn't certain what that meant, but he didn't have the strength to ask for clarification.

"At any rate, we shall keep you apprised of the progress," the physician said.

"No," Vader said, 'do not contact me,' he told him. "No one must know about this, is that clear?"

The physician nodded, unaware that his mind had just been manipulated.

"When can I get out of here?" Vader asked.

"A few more hours," the doctor replied. "Until your strength returns. Would you like something for the pain?"

"Will it delay my departure?" Vader asked.

"Yes, the painkillers do tend to make you..."

“Then no,” Vader replied, knowing he daren’t take any more time away from his ship. “I want to leave as soon as possible.”

The physician nodded. “Very well,” he said. “I’ll check back with you in another few hours.”

“Make it one,” Vader told him.

“I’ll check back with you in an hour,” the physician said automatically, and then turned and left.

Vader closed his eyes as he did so, his mind turning to his wife, hoping he hadn’t destroyed what was left of their relationship.

Coruscant

Luke and Leia were both very restless that night, each of them subconsciously sensing their father’s pain. Finally, when neither could stand it any longer, they both got out of bed and met in the common room between their respective bedrooms.

“You felt it too, didn’t you?” Leia asked her twin.

Luke nodded. “What should we do?” he asked.

Leia considered for a moment. “Let’s tell Mom,” she replied.

“What can she do?” Luke asked, following his sister to the door.

“Maybe nothing,” she replied. “I just think she should know.”

Luke shrugged, and followed along with a yawn, hoping his mother wouldn’t mind being awoken in the dead of night.

The twins needn’t have worried about waking their mother, for she had been restless since retiring for the night. And when she heard a light rapping on her door, she sat up at once. “Come in,” she called

Luke and Leia entered the room and approached their mother’s bed, the lights coming on as they did so.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, seeing the distraught expression upon their faces.

“It’s Dad,” Leia said. “Both Luke and I have this bad feeling about him,” she told her mother.

Padmé frowned. “What do you mean?” she asked, their words alarming her. “Bad in what way?”

“Like he’s in pain,” Luke told her.

Padme was silent as she considered this. “Perhaps he is,” she replied. “I don’t imagine the suit and mask he wears is very comfortable.”

Luke and Leia weren’t certain if that was what they sensed, or something more.

“Can we contact him?” Leia asked. ‘Just to make sure he’s okay?’ Padmé could see how worried the twins were, and she shared their fear. “In the morning,” she

said at last. "You two have school tomorrow. Go back to sleep."

"But Mom..." Luke protested.

"Is he in danger?" she asked. "Is his life in jeopardy?"

The twins looked at the other as though to consult with the other.

"No," Leia said finally.

"Then go back to sleep and talk to him in the morning," she told them. "Okay?"

The twins finally realized that what she said made sense. After all, what could they do?

"Okay," Luke replied.

"Go back to sleep," Padmé told them, lying down once more with a yawn.

The twins left their mother's room and headed back to their own quarters, sensing that they'd get no sleep until they'd spoken to their father.

"Luke, wait," Leia said as they passed by their father's office.

"What?" Luke asked sleepily.

"The comlink," she said, nodding in the direction of the office. "It's on Dad's desk."

Luke became alert at once. "How do you know?"

"I saw it earlier," she said, walking into the room. The lights came on as she did so, and Luke followed.

"Leia, Mom said to wait until the morning," Luke reminded her.

Leia looked at him. "What are you going to do, tattle on me?" she challenged.

Luke frowned. "No!" he retorted at once. "I'm not a tattle tale!"

Leia smiled. "Good," she said, picking up the comlink. "Now do you want to talk to Dad or what?" she asked him, one hand on her hip.

"Yeah, I do," he replied.

"Then let's do it," she said walking confidently towards the door, comlink in her hand. Luke had no choice but to follow her.

Kamino

After an hour had passed, the physician returned to Vader as promised. Vader was still in a great deal of pain, but was anxious to leave and return to his ship.

"Lord Vader, are you sure you don't want something for the pain?" the doctor asked as two attending droids assisted Vader.

"Yes I'm sure," Vader replied. 'I will return here in one month to see how things have progressed,' he told the physician. "In the mean time, you will tell no one what has happened here, and make no contact with me. Is that clear?"

“Yes sir,” the physician replied. “I will see you in a month’s time.”

“You will,” Vader replied, rising to his feet slowly. The droids offered him a hover chair to leave the facility, but Vader ignored their offer and left under his own power, his stride somewhat slower than it normally was.

A shuttle from the *Exactor* was waiting for him, and after a seemingly endless walk in the torrential rain, he reached it.

“Welcome aboard, Lord Vader,” Lieutenant Piett said as Vader entered the shuttle.

“Take me back to the ship, Piett,” Vader told the young officer.

“Of course, sir,” Piett replied. Vader had chosen the young officer to accompany him because out of all the officers on board the *Exactor*, Piett seemed the only one trustworthy and intelligent. As soon as Vader had seated himself in the passenger hold, Piett lifted off and directed the small craft through the driving Kamino rain.

No sooner had Vader settled into his chair in a somewhat comfortable position when his comlink went off. With an annoyed growl Vader removed it from his belt and activated it.

“What is it?” he snapped.

There was silence for a moment, and then a very tentative, nervous voice was heard. “Dad? Dad is that you?”

Vader closed his eyes, doing his best to attain some level of calmness. “Yes, Leia,” he said. “It is. Isn’t it the middle of the night on Coruscant right now?” he asked.

“Yes it is,” Leia admitted. “But we were worried about you, and wanted to talk to you to make sure you’re okay.”

“Worried? Who’s worried?” he asked.

“Me and Luke,” Leia replied.

“We both felt that you were in pain, Dad,” Luke spoke up. “We couldn’t sleep it was so strong.”

Vader nodded, not surprised by his twins’ sensibilities. “You needn’t concern yourselves,” he told them, trying to soften his tone. “I’m fine.”

“No you’re not,” Leia replied at once. “I can hear it in your voice that you’re not.”

“So can I,” added Luke.

Vader sighed. “Young ones, there are times when I must undergo certain... medical interventions,” he told them, not altogether untruthfully, “that are unpleasant and quite painful. But they are necessary, and that is all you are sensing.”

“Really? It’s nothing bad?” Leia asked. “You’re not hurt?”

Vader felt his eyes prick with tears as he felt the love emanating from his daughter at this simple question. “No, young one,” he told her. “I’m not hurt. Now you two really ought to go back to bed before your mother catches you in the act,” he told them.

The twins were silent for a few moments and Vader smiled to himself.

“What do you mean, catches us in the act?” Luke asked.

“I mean you have obviously contacted me without her permission,” he told them. ‘Otherwise you’d not be talking in hushed tones, nor would I sense the heightened sense of alertness that you are both exhibited, as well as....’

“Okay, okay,” Leia said. “You’re right. But it was just because we love you, Daddy. Don’t be mad.”

“I’m not,” he told her. “I’m grateful for your concern. Now go to bed, or I’ll rat you both out to your mother.”

Luke and Leia grinned. “Okay Dad,” Luke said. “When are you coming home? You didn’t even say goodbye to us.”

The smile left Vader’s face. “I was called away, son,” he told them. “That happens sometimes. I expect to be back within a week, maybe two.”

“That long?” Luke whined.

“I’m afraid so,” Vader replied. “I’ll keep in touch, don’t worry.”

“Okay, Dad,” Leia replied. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” Vader replied. “Be good.”

Luke and Leia smiled and then ended the transmission.

“Feel better?”

Both twins whirled around to see their mother standing in the doorway. They looked at one another, shocked that they’d be caught.

“We’ll talk about this in the morning,” Padme said, holding out her hand for the comlink. “Now go to bed.”

The twins skedaddled to their beds without another word.

Padmé looked down at the comlink in her hands, realizing that her children had inherited more from their father than just his Force abilities.

Chapter 48

Forty-eight

Coruscant

Padmé was excited and surprised to hear from her sister the very next morning. Sola had accepted the invitation and was on her way to the capital. *She must really be worried about me*, Padmé reflected as she went to join her children at breakfast.

"I have some exciting news," Padmé told them as she sat down. "Your Aunt Sola is coming to visit."

"That's awesome!" Leia said with a smile. "Is she going to bring her daughters with her?" "No, the girls are in school like you are," she told them. "But maybe when the holidays come we can go to Naboo to visit them."

"Do you think Dad would come too?" Luke asked.

Somehow I doubt it, Padmé thought. "I wouldn't count on it, Luke," she said. "Speaking of your Dad, just what were the two of you thinking last night going against my wishes so blatantly?"

Luke and Leia looked at one another, hoping that their mother had forgotten the entire incident. No such luck.

"I'm sorry, Mom," Leia spoke up. "It was my idea. I talked Luke into it."

Padmé looked at her daughter. "I'm surprised at you, Leia," she told her. "And more than a little disappointed."

Leia lowered her eyes, mortified. "I'm sorry," she said quietly.

"I think the two of you are grounded from using the holonet for the next few days," Padmé told them. Luke looked askance, and was about to protest when Padmé continued. "It may have been Leia's idea, but you followed right along," she told him. "Guilty by association."

Luke closed his mouth, knowing better to argue.

"Now go and get ready for school," she told them. "Han will be up any minute to collect you."

The twins did as they were told, each of them a little shamefaced for having defied their mother so blatantly.

Padmé watched them leave, her first trial as a disciplinarian over with. *Was I too harsh with them? Too lenient? Do they think I'm unfair, or a pushover?* She worried, wishing that their father was around to see what he thought. He'd been their parent nearly a month before she came into their lives, and seemed to have the whole discipline thing down pat. *But if I ask him, then I'm admitting that I need him*, she reminded herself as she picked up the breakfast dishes; *and I can't do that*.

"Captain Kassel," Padmé said as she walked into Vader's office.

Kassel looked up from the computer screen. "Yes Milady? Can I do something for you?"

"My sister is arriving this morning on a transport from Naboo," she told him. "I'd like to go and meet her."

"I'd be happy to take you, Milady," he replied, subtly insinuating himself into her plans. "What time is she due to arrive?"

Padmé checked her wrist chrono. "In about an hour," she told him.

"With rush hour traffic it will take us that long just to get there," he told her.

"In that case, let's get going," she said.

"After you, Milady."

Star Destroyer Exactor

"What do you mean, he left *you* with instructions?" Captain Ozzel demanded. "I'm the captain of this vessel, Piett, not you!"

Piett nodded, feeling quite awkward. "Yes sir, I am well aware of that sir," he replied. "I am only relaying what Lord Vader told me to tell you," he repeated for what seemed the fiftieth time. "He is not to be disturbed until we reach the drive yards."

Ozzel scowled petulantly. He had always suspected that Vader favored Piett, and now he knew it for certain. "Well perhaps I will just take this matter up with Lord Vader," he said, walking off the bridge. "After all, he is the only man on this ship I take orders from," he added snidely.

Piett thought about warning him, but decided it would be a waste of time, and simply returned to his station.

Vader had been in his quarters since returning from Kamino, not wishing his men to see him in his weakened state. Alone in his hyperbaric chamber he could get the rest he needed, unfettered by the mask he had come to loathe. Of course, sitting in the exact duplicate of the chamber he had in his home on Coruscant harkened to mind the extraordinary events that had transpired inside that very pod only a few short days ago. Try as he might, Vader could not stem the flood of memories and sensations that filled his mind...

"Are you all right?" he asked Padmé .

"I'm better than all right," she smiled, looking back at him. She looked around the pod. "Oxygen enriched atmosphere?" she asked.

"Yes," he told her as his hands moved up to caress her. "It won't hurt you," he assured her.

"I'm not worried," she assured him, leaning back to be closer to him. But the controls on his chest pressed into her back, and she moved away. "Sorry," she said.

Vader felt badly, and kissed her shoulder. "No, I'm sorry," he said, kissing down her back. Padmé closed her eyes with a smile. "I always loved it when you kissed me there," she told him.

"You loved it no matter where I kissed you," he told her, kissing along her spine.

Padmé laughed. "Yes, you're right," she sighed.

"Lord Vader... Lord Vader I must speak with you."

Vader's musings were rudely interrupted by the rather irritating voice of Captain Ozzel. He lowered his helmet, prepared to make the thoughtless officer pay for the interruption.

"What is it, Ozzel?" Vader demanded as he came mask to face with the captain.

"Sir, Lieutenant Piett had the audacity to tell me that you had given him..."

"And you had the audacity to interrupt me when I specifically left word not to do so," he told Ozzel angrily.

"But my lord, Piett is an underling, surely..."

Ozzel wasn't able to finish the sentence, for he found himself hurled against the far wall. The bulkhead crumpled under the impact, and Ozzel's broken body slumped to the floor.

Vader turned in his chair to the comscreen and hailed the bridge. Piett's face appeared at once.

"Piett, send a clean up crew down here," Vader told him.

Piett didn't need to ask why. "I did try to warn Captain Ozzel, my lord," he said.

"I'm sure you did," Vader replied. "Ozzel was an idiot. You're in command now, Captain."

Piett's eyebrows shot upward. "Thank you, Lord Vader!" he replied eagerly, quite surprised at being promoted.

"What is our ETA to Kuat?" Vader asked.

"Approximately six hours sir," Piett replied.

"Very well," Vader responded. "You have the bridge until then," he told his new captain.

"Yes sir," Piett replied. "I'll alert you when we arrive."

Vader turned off the transmission as a clean up crew entered his quarters. He watched them briefly as they hauled out the broken body of Ozzel and then closed the pod once more.

Coruscant

"Welcome to Coruscant," Padmé said as she embraced her sister. "I'm so happy you decided to come!"

"So am I," Sola replied. "You sounded like you needed someone to talk to, Padmé," she added, pulling back at looking at her sister.

Padmé nodded. "You're right," she said. 'I do. Sola this is Jon Kassel,' she said, indicating the ever faithful captain. "He's my bodyguard, chauffeur, protector, assistant... did I leave out anything, Captain?" she asked with a smile.

Kassel smiled. "Personal shopper?" he joked.

Padmé laughed. “Well, on occasion, perhaps,” she replied. “This is my sister, Sola Naberrrie,” she told him, turning back to Sola.

“Nice to meet you, Captain,” Sola said.

“Pleasure,” Kassel replied. “Shall we get going?” he asked.

“Yes,” Padmé said. “Let’s go home.”

Sola was rather quiet on the trip to Padmé’s new home, for her sister was not what she expected. When Padmé had told her that Vader had found her and that she was now living with him, she expected to find Padmé depressed and angry. But she wasn’t. Of course, Padmé had always been very good at hiding her true feelings. As a politician it had been a vital skill, and it was one she’d mastered.

“This is quite the place,” Sola commented as they reached the complex. “I can’t quite imagine someone living here alone,” she added.

“I don’t think anyone ever has,” Padmé said. “There’s an entire staff that inhabits the lower level.”

“I see,” Sola said as they stepped on the lift, having left Kassel to work on something in the hangar. “So where is Vader?” she asked.

“On a mission,” Padmé replied. “I’m not entirely sure where, actually.”

Sola nodded, watching her sister closely. “Please tell me he’s not mistreating you,” she said. “After Mustafar, I...”

“No, he’s not,” Padmé replied at once. “I’m sure he feels terrible about what happened there,” she added, hoping she was right.

“Has he said so?” she asked. “Has he apologized?”

Padmé was silent for a moment, giving Sola her answer. “No, he hasn’t,” she said finally.

Sola shook her head. “Padmé, what are you doing here?” she asked. ‘You told me he wasn’t holding you against your will. So why stay?’

Padmé frowned. “I can’t believe you’re asking me that,” she replied. “Luke and Leia, they are my reasons. I’ve missed the first ten years of their lives, Sola,” she continued. “And they’ve lived without their real parents for their entire lives. There is no where I’d rather be than right here, even if it means living with Darth Vader.”

Sola nodded, watching her sister closely as they sat down in the living room. She looked different to her somehow; as though being with her children had rejuvenated her. Or was there more to it?

“Well you look wonderful,” Sola said finally. “Motherhood definitely seems to be agreeing with you,” she observed.

Padmé smiled. “I can’t wait for you to meet them,” she said. ‘They are so different, the two of them. I can’t imagine how I lived without them so long,’ she told her sister. “We’re truly a family now,” she added.

“And where does Vader fit into this family?” Sola asked. “Exactly what is your relationship with him anyway?”

Padmé looked away for a moment, unsure how to answer the question. “It’s... complicated,” she said at last.

Sola frowned. “What do you mean, complicated?”

Padmé sighed. “We’re not always on the best of terms,” she told her sister. “In fact, we fight pretty frequently.”

“That’s not surprising,” Sola commented. “Given the history between you two. You once told me, not that long ago, that you would hate him for the rest of your life, Padmé. You don’t hate him, do you?”

“No, I don’t,” Padmé replied. “When I found out that Luke and Leia were alive, that he hadn’t killed them when he...”

“Tried to kill you,” Sola interjected. “Did you forget that? It’s wonderful that the twins are alive, but that doesn’t change the fact that he tried to kill you, Padmé. And he would have if Obi-Wan hadn’t shown up when he had.”

“I don’t know if he would have,” Padmé replied.

“The fact that he attacked you in the first place is bad enough, Padmé,” Sola said.

Padmé stood up, growing annoyed by her sister’s badgering. “What do you want me to say, Sola?” she asked. “What would you have me do? Sue him for custody? Just walk out and leave my children without their mother? Do you have a suggestion?”

Sola sighed, and then stood up. “I’m sorry,” she said, coming over to her sister. “You’re right, it’s a complicated situation. And you’re making the best of it as only you can.”

“I’m trying,” Padmé replied quietly. ‘Sometimes things are wonderful, they really are,’ she said, looking up at Sola. “And then other times...” her eyes filled with tears as she thought of the ugly fight that had sent Vader out of the house. “Oh Sola, I think I’ve made a really big mistake,” she said.

Sola frowned. “What do you mean?” she asked, and then an idea came to her. “Oh Padmé, you didn’t... you and Vader haven’t...” she stopped, too embarrassed to say any more.

Padmé looked away, unable to face her sister. “Yes,” she replied, knowing what her sister was asking. “We’ve been sexually involved.”

“Oh, Padmé,” Sola said, “how could you? I mean, really... how?? I didn’t think it was even possible...”

“Don’t be absurd,” Padmé retorted, her face turning pink. “He’s still human you know.”

“Thank the Maker for that at least,” Sola muttered. “But how could you want to be with him? He’s not the man you love, Padmé. He’s not Anakin.”

“I know,” Padmé replied sitting down again. ‘He is and he isn’t,’ she continued. “Sometimes he’s so caring, so...romantic even,” she told her, a hint of a smile on her face. “And then other times he’s cruel and angry and... I don’t know who he is anymore.”

“And you thought having sex with him would help you figure that out?” Sola asked.

“No, it just sort of...happened,” Padmé told her sister. “Kind of a heat of the moment thing. At least the first time,” she continued.

“You did it more than once??” Sola asked incredulously.

“Only twice,” Padmé said. “But I’m beginning to think now it was all a big mistake.”

“It wasn’t the same, was it?” Sola asked. “You were disappointed, right?”

Padmé shook her head. “Oh no,” she assured her sister. ‘Not at all. He’s... “she stopped, realizing her sister wouldn’t want to hear any details.” It’s not that,’ she said. “We had a fight, a really bad one,” she told her sister. “And we both said some very nasty, very hurtful things,” she continued. “And I wonder now if I’ve only complicated things by getting sexually involved with him again.”

Sola was silent for a moment as she pondered this. The fact that her sister had been sexually involved with Darth Vader still shocked her, the fact that she’d wanted to be even more so. Unless...

“Did he force himself on you, Padmé?” she asked her sister finally. “Did he rape you?”

“No!” Padmé cried. “I can’t believe you’d even think such a thing! If you must know, it was me who initiated it, on both occasions.”

Sola was embarrassed, and said nothing for a moment. “Can I ask why?” she asked finally.

“Why do you think?” Padmé replied tersely. “He’s a man, I’m a woman, and we were once very much in love, and shared an amazing physical relationship. And ten years is a long time, Sola. Do I need to say any more?”

“No,” Sola replied, staring down at the floor. ‘I don’t know what to say, Padmé,’ she said after a few moments of awkward silence. “Clearly the two of you have some very strong feelings for one another. But it’s also clear that your differences are too big to ignore. Does that sound about right?”

“I suppose so,” Padmé replied. “I don’t know what to do,” she said quietly.

Sola said nothing in response, not knowing what to say, and simply put her arm around her sister’s shoulders.

Kuat Drive Yard

“Welcome to the Yard, Lord Vader,” a rather large alien said in greeting. “We’ve been expecting you.”

Vader walked through the hangar bay beside the man, a small phalanx of storm troopers close behind them. “Where are you holding them?”
‘In the detention block,’ the alien replied. “We don’t have a lot of space, and believe me, they’ve been complaining about that.”

“Pity,” Vader replied tersely. “I’ll ensure they have more comfortable accommodations shortly,” he remarked.

The alien grinned. "Right this way," he said.

Vader and his troops followed the alien through the enormous facility to a set of blast doors beyond which was the small detention block. A short way down the corridor the man stopped. "They're in here," he said, indicating a door where two clone troopers stood guard. "You need any help?"

Vader smirked under his mask. "No," he replied, moving to the door. The troopers moved aside at once, allowing Vader to enter the cell. The alien followed him in. There were about a dozen men inside, some of them alien.

"This is about half of them," the alien in charge explained. "The rest are scattered in the cells around the block," he told Vader.

Vader nodded in understanding. "I will require a room for interrogation," he told the man. "Have you one prepared?"

"Yes sir," the alien replied. "This way."

Vader pointed to the first man who looked up at him with terror in his eyes. "Bring this one," he told the clones at his side. "We'll start with him."

Coruscant

"It's so wonderful to meet you both!" Sola declared after giving Luke and Leia each many hugs and kisses. "I've heard so much about you from your mother already I feel like I already know you!"

Luke and Leia were excited to meet their one and only aunt, who, they decided, was not nearly as beautiful as their mother.

"So you two have had some big changes in your lives recently," Sola commented as they all sat down together. "I imagine things must seem pretty confusing at times."

Luke and Leia looked at one another.

"Not really," Luke said. "At first it was, but now that we're all together, it seems like that's how it should have been all along."

"Luke's right," Leia spoke up. "We know how much our parents love us," she said, looking at Padmé with a smile. "And we love them just as much. We're very happy being with both of them."

Sola nodded, not sure if her niece and nephew were telling her what they thought she wanted to hear or what they truly felt. "You lived with your father alone for a few weeks," she said. "What was that like?"

"It was cool," Leia said. "He fixed up our rooms just how we like them, got us into a wonderful school," she began.

"Showed me how to build stuff," Luke piped up. "He's good at that, just like me. You know what he did when one of my favorite toys got broken?"

"Bought you a new one?" Sola suggested, knowing Vader was very wealthy.

Luke shook his head. “No, he stayed up half the night to fix it,” he told his aunt. “He knew how special it was to me, and knew replacing it wouldn’t be the same. So he fixed it. It must have taken him hours, but he did it. That’s how much he loves me.”

Padmé had not heard this story before, and she found herself smiling as Luke told it. “He did that for you, Luke?” she asked.

Luke looked at his mother and nodded. “I was asleep, but Leia saw him take it from my room, right Leia?”

Leia nodded. “Yes, I saw him with it when he came into my room and showed me the holo vid of your wedding,” she told her mother. “I was feeling sad and missing Alderaan, and he showed me that to cheer me up, even though I know it made him really sad to see it.”

“Why would it make him sad?” Sola asked.

“Because this was before we knew Mom was alive,” Leia explained. ‘And Dad couldn’t even talk about her back then, he missed her so much.’ She looked at Padmé. “He loves our mother very much,” she concluded.

Sola looked at her sister, who seemed quite uncomfortable with her daughter’s declaration. And yet, weren’t Luke and Leia as Force sensitive as their father? Surely they could sense the emotions of others as well as he did. Was Leia correct in her assertion?

“I think I’d like to see these rooms of yours,” Sola said finally, standing up. “They sound very impressive.”

“Oh they are,” Luke assured her. “Come on, mine first.”

“Luke you *always* get to show yours first!” Leia complained as they ran out of the room, dragging their aunt behind them.

Kuat Drive Yard

It wasn’t long before Vader had separated those who were merely on duty when the sabotage had occurred from those who seemed likely candidates to have had a hand in it. It had taken hours of sifting through the minds of the more than two dozen prisoners. After the grueling procedure he’d endured while on Kamino, he had still not recovered his full strength. Spending the better part of the day interrogating the prisoners had sapped what was left of it, and so he decided to return to the *Exactor* at the end of the day.

“Lord Vader, what about the men in there?” the alien plant manager asked him.

Vader stopped as he passed the room where those he had deemed innocent had been detained. His first impulse was to have them killed, for they had been on duty when the sabotage had taken place. Making an example of them would go far in tightening security and making sure that everyone remained on their toes. So why was he hesitating to order their deaths? Why did Padmé’s words jump to his mind? *I don’t believe in taking a life to make a point*, she had said. What would she say to taking fourteen lives?

“Release them,” Vader said finally, and then walked away, more tired than he’d felt in a long time.

“Welcome onboard, Lord Vader,” Pielt said in greeting as he met Vader in the hangar bay. “I trust things went...smoothly,” he said tentatively.

"I have narrowed it down to several likely candidates," Vader said. "I will continue the investigation in the morning."

Piett nodded. "An excellent idea," he said, knowing that Vader was still not himself. "I wish you a goodnight, sir."

Vader made no reply and simply left the hangar bay and headed to the lift. The bulkhead in his quarters still showed evidence of Ozzel's demise from earlier. He ignored it and headed to his hyperbaric chamber. Deciding he needed to talk to see his children after such a long and unpleasant day, he activated his comscreen and coded in the twins' that was located in the common room they shared. Before long he saw the face of his son, who smiled broadly when he saw his father.

"Hi Dad!" Luke exclaimed. "Look Leia, it's Dad!"

Sola and Padmé stood back as Leia ran to sit beside Luke.

"Looks like they love their father," Sola commented to her sister.

Padmé nodded, watching Vader on the screen, knowing he couldn't see her from where she was standing.

"It is good to see you, young ones," Vader said, simply drinking in the sight of his children's smiling faces. "Are you behaving yourselves?"

"Don't we always?" Leia asked.

"Do you really want me to answer that?" Vader replied.

The twins giggled. Leia looked over her shoulder to her mother and then back again. "We got caught with the comlink," she told her father.

"I did try to warn you," he replied.

"Yeah, I know," Leia replied.

"Where are you, Dad?" Luke asked.

"Let me show you," he replied, changing their view to the outside of the ship where an enormous super star destroyer was under construction.

"Whoa," Luke said in amazement. "That thing's *huge*!"

"That is a super star destroyer," Vader told them when his image returned to the screen. "The first of its kind. I had a hand in its design."

"You did?" Leia said. 'Really?'

Vader nodded. "Yes, really," he replied, amused by his children's excitement.

Padmé watched in silence as her children spoke with their father, the gentle manner he exhibited with them going straight to her heart. Sola watched too, hardly able to believe that it was Darth Vader she was watching.

"Time for me to sign off," Vader told them. "It's been a very long day."

"Goodnight Dad," Luke said. "We love you."

“We miss you too,” Leia put in.

Vader nodded. “I miss you both, and love you very much,” he replied. “I’ll see you soon.”

With that Vader closed the transmission. *I miss you, Padmé*, he told her, having sensed her close by while he was talking to the twins. *Goodnight, my beloved*.

Chapter 49

Forty-nine

Coruscant

After dinner that evening, Padmé, Sola and the twins headed down to the pool for a swim. Sola was impressed by the facilities that the twins felt compelled to show her, and decided that whatever else Darth Vader may be, he was certainly a good provider.

"You're doing very well, Luke," Padmé told her son encouragingly as she and Sola sat on the edge of the pool watching the twins. 'Luke has only recently learned how to swim,' she told her sister. "He's made excellent progress in a very short time."

Sola nodded. "Must have had a good teacher," she suggested with a smile.

Padmé smiled. "Well, a motivated one anyway," she told her.

"You ought to bring them to Naboo," Sola said. "They would love it up at the lake retreat."

The smile faded from Padmé's face at the thought of her favorite place in the galaxy, of all the wonderful times she'd shared with Anakin there. "I don't know about that," she said finally. "I don't think their father would approve."

Sola frowned. "Does he make all the decisions, Padmé?" she asked. "Don't you have a say in anything?"

"Of course I do," Padmé replied immediately; but upon reflection realized that her sister was right. "I suppose it's just easier to give in sometimes than to argue," she relented.

Sola nodded. "Yes, I'm sure it must be," she said.

"I don't want Luke and Leia to be constantly exposed to fighting," Padmé explained. "Their father and I have been trying our best to be civil to one another for their sake."

"Civil? Sounds like you've gone a little past civil, Padmé," Sola remarked with a smile.

Padmé's face reddened. "I suppose so," she admitted. 'But it won't happen again,' she vowed. "Not until he changes."

Sola nodded, not believing a word her sister said. "Yes, well we'll see about that," she remarked. "In the event that it should happen again, you might want to consider using some sort of birth control, Padmé."

Padmé looked at her sister. "Birth control?"

Sola nodded. "You know, to prevent pregnancy," she said.

"I know what it's for, Sola," Padmé replied tersely. "I hardly think it's necessary considering I have no plans to be sexually involved with him in the future."

“Did you have plans to be sexually involved with him before it happened?” Sola asked. “You told me it was the heat of the moment. That doesn’t sound like you planned it to me.”

“Well, we didn’t,” Padmé admitted.

“And if you’re not on birth control, then your spontaneity may have much more far reaching results than you’d anticipated,” Sola stated.

Padmé shook her head. “Doubtful,” she said.

Sola smiled. “It only takes once, Padmé,” she said. “And you did it twice,” she pointed out.

Padmé rolled her eyes. “I am *not* pregnant,” she averred. “The timing is all wrong,” she added for good measure.

“I hope you’re right Padmé,” Sola replied. “Or your life will become more complicated than you can imagine.”

Kuat Drive Yard

Vader returned to the detention block early the next morning, knowing that the task ahead of him was not going to be a pleasant one. And yet, he didn’t have the luxury of time. The emperor would no doubt be demanding a report on the situation any day now, and if Vader had nothing to report, he was flirting with disaster.

Palpatine had made the eradication of the Rebel Alliance Vader’s primary job, and blamed him for every incident that occurred. The fact that the rebels had allies in every sector and suppliers in every system meant nothing to Palpatine; in his view, Vader simply wasn’t working hard enough. And with all that Vader was trying to juggle in her personal life right now, the last thing he needed was the emperor finding another reason to punish him.

“Good morning Lord Vader,” said the fat alien who’d greeted him the previous day.

“Have the first prisoner brought into the interrogation room,” Vader responded without returning the greeting. “Let’s begin.”

Coruscant

Padmé and Sola stayed up quite late into the night talking, and so when Padme finally went to bed, she fell asleep almost immediately. It wasn’t long before she found herself dreaming...

Padmé had just returned to her room from a late night swim. She had been unable to sleep earlier, and thought the exercise would help. She opened the door to her bedroom and walked inside, closing it behind her. Unwrapping the towel, she walked to the fresher and draped it over a rack to dry, and then proceeded to remove her swimsuit. The water had been quite warm, but the exposure to the cooler air gave her goose bumps. She combed through her wet hair and then walked into the bedroom to fetch a warm nightgown. Lying down in bed, she turned off the light and closed her eyes. She had almost fallen asleep when she realized that she was not alone in her room.

“Who’s there?” she asked, sitting up in the bed. But there was no answer, and Padmé began to think that she was paranoid. She lay down again and closed her eyes, willing herself

to relax. Then she hear a voice in the dark that she recognized well. "I've missed you, Angel." She smiled.

"I've missed you too," she whispered. "So much..."

Padmé awoke with a start. The dream had been so real that she was trembling with emotion. Sitting up in her bed, she ran her shaking hands through her hair. *Get out of my mind!* She thought in frustration, wondering if somehow Vader had sent her this dream telepathically. *Don't do this to me... don't tease me this way,* she thought as tears filled her eyes. *I need you, Anakin, please come back to me...*

Kuat Drive Yard

Another day spent at the Drive Yards and Vader was a little closer to cracking open the case. Three of the men he had interrogated had, with the help of a rather large dose of truth serum, provided him with information that he hoped would be useful. It seemed that there were several high ranking officials within the Imperial bureaucracy who had known dealings with the Rebel Alliance. And while Vader had suspected this to be true for quite some time, he'd never had names before. Until now. And one of those names was Bail Organa.

Vader had waited a long time to have a reason to arrest Organa; and now, having learned of the viceroy's part in the abduction of Leia, he was more anxious than ever to send him to the spice mines of Kessel. And yet, a part of him dreaded the idea of it, and that frustrated him. Surely Organa deserved everything that was coming to him; so why did the idea of telling Leia that the man she called Father for ten years was never going to see the light of day again bother Vader so much?

As Vader headed for his shuttle, thoughts of Organa were shoved aside as he sensed a very strong wave of emotion emanating from someone close to him. It wasn't the twins, for he knew their signatures well by now. It was Padmé.

Vader said nothing to the pilot of the shuttle as he headed to the back of the craft and took a seat, anxious to focus his mental energy on what it was she was feeling. It was a jumble of emotions, he discovered upon closer examination; not the least of which was frustration. *Is she regretting her decision?* He wondered. *Does she want me as much as I want her?*

But Vader soon realized that there was a stronger emotion than her frustration, and that was sadness. Vader had never been able to handle Padmé's sadness, and this was no exception. Suddenly all the cruel words he'd hurled at her came back to him, the hurt he'd seen in her eyes as he did so. And Vader felt an emotion he'd not felt in a very long time: guilt. *She reaches out to you and accepts you despite the thing you've become, and what do you do? You accuse her of being shallow; you dare to put conditions upon the relationship you have no right to any more.* Self recrimination filled him, leaving an empty, bitter feeling inside. *You don't deserve her, you never have, and yet she wants you, despite everything, despite all the pain you've caused her, despite Mustafar... and you have the audacity to make demands of her? You should be groveling on your knees before her begging for her forgiveness!*

"Lord Vader?"

Vader looked up at the pilot, shaken from his dark musings.

“We’re on board, sir,” the young man reported. “Is everything all right?”

Vader stood up. *No, everything is not all right*, he thought as he strode past the man without a word.

Coruscant

Padmé and Sola spent the next day shopping; something they’d always enjoyed doing together. It wasn’t so much the purchases as the time spent together, and the laughs they shared, something both had missed sorely in recent years.

Of course, no outing would be complete without the ever present body guard, Captain Kassel, who kept a discreet and yet safe distance from the ladies, not wanting to intrude on their time together. Kassel, who had never enjoyed shopping when he’d been married, was dragged through more shops than he’d ever wanted to see in his lifetime. But he didn’t say a word, ever the consummate professional that he was.

“Are you going to grow your hair out long again?” Sola asked when they sat down finally to take some lunch. “I remember how much you hated to cut it.”

“I don’t know,” Padmé said, running a hand over her shoulder length curls. ‘I’m getting used to it this way.’

“Did he notice?” Sola asked.

“Did who notice what?” Padmé asked.

Sola sighed. “You know who, Vader,” she said. ‘Did he notice you’d cut it? Or does he even notice things like that anymore?’

“Yes, he noticed,” Padme replied, remembering back to the comment he’d made as he took her to his home for the first time. “Almost immediately.”

Sola nodded. “Was he disappointed?”

“If he was, he didn’t say so,” Padmé replied. “I think he was so shocked that I was alive that he didn’t really care that my hair was short.”

“I’m sure,” Sola agreed. “He must have been thrilled to see you,” she said, watching her sister closely for a reaction.

Padmé said nothing for a moment, for she honestly didn’t know how he’d felt. “It’s not easy to read him now,” she said finally.

“The mask?”

“Not just that,” Padmé said. ‘He hides so much of what he is feeling now. Anakin never did that,’ she added. “He’s so... different now.”

Sola nodded. “But you still love him,” she observed.

Padmé looked at her in surprise. “Is that what you think?” she asked.

“Yes,” Sola replied at once. “It’s pretty obvious from the outside looking in, Padmé,” she added.

“Is there anything else I can get for you ladies?” the serving droid asked, interrupting their conversation.

Padme looked up, glad for the interruption. “Just the bill, thank you,” she replied.

Sola noted how her deftly sister had avoided the issue, which only made her believe that she was dead on in her observation. But for now she said nothing, knowing that Padmé would have to come to that realization herself.

Chapter 50

Fifty

Coruscant— Office of Senator Organa of Alderaan

Bail Organa entered his office early the next morning and was shocked to see two storm troopers and an Imperial officer waiting for him.

“What is the meaning of this?” Bail demanded angrily. “How dare you enter my private offices?”

“Bail Organa, you’re under arrest for collaborating with known traitors to the Empire,” the officer reported as the storm troopers placed binders on Bail’s wrists.

“Are you mad?!” Bail exclaimed. “I’m a member of the Imperial Senator! I’m Viceroy of Alderaan! This is an outrage!”

The officer waited for Bail to finish his tirade before speaking again. “Let’s go, Senator,” he said finally as the storm troopers lead the disgruntled viceroy out of the door.

As the troopers lead Organa to a waiting shuttle, the reporters who had caught wind of the arrest swarmed around with holorecorders, all of them shouting questions at the senator. Organa ignored them, however, not wishing to give in to their hopes to have a juicy story. *You’ll pay for this, Vader, Organa thought angrily; I’ll make sure of it!*

Kuat Drive Yard

Vader stood by, arms folded over his chest as the storm troopers carried out body after body from the interrogation room. Not all of the prisoners had survived the mind probe, although most had provided Vader with information before losing their minds completely. The four remaining prisoners were escorted under heavy guard back to the *Exactor*, where they would travel to a prison cell until their trial. *A waste of time*, Vader thought darkly, knowing that any trial held would be useless. He already knew everything those men knew; no lawyer could read the minds of others as he could. And yet, the judicial process must be observed, even if that process was, in reality, a farce. Everyone knew that the Empire controlled the courts; trials were simply window dressing, a thin and meaningless veneer of democracy over a complete and utter dictatorship.

Vader followed the prisoner to the shuttle, the air thick with their fear. *Rebel scum*, he thought angrily. *So long as they exist there will never be peace in the galaxy*, he thought. *Have you ever considered that we may be on the wrong side?* Vader frowned as the words of his wife from many years earlier came to mind. Knowing now what he did, knowing what a monster Palpatine truly was, perhaps she’d been right. *Is the Empire the true evil?* He thought, growing more confused. *Is it wrong to defend something created by such evil incarnate?* Vader was sure that Palpatine represented the true and ultimate evil, a man who would lie to him, telling him that he killed his own wife, a man who would keep him from medical interventions that would free him from the prison he’d lived in for ten years could be

nothing but evil. *And you will destroy him very soon*, he reminded himself. *And make things right in the galaxy.*

"Your orders, sir?" Captain Piett asked as Vader exited the shuttle.

"Make for Dathomir," Vader told him. "We have some guests for them," he added.

Piett nodded. "I'll alert them at once, sir," he replied.

Dathomir, the other side of the galaxy, Vader thought as Piett walked away. *It will be a long time indeed before I get home again.*

Coruscant

Dinner had concluded, and while the twins did their homework, Padmé and Sola decided to see watch the evening news. In reality, Padmé was hoping to learn something about Vader's mission, but didn't tell Sola as much. She was already asking too many questions as it was.

"You know, I don't usually watch the net that much," Sola commented, "but since seeing Luke and Leia with their father, I've decided it's worth checking out once in a while."

Padmé smiled. "Well if you hadn't seen them, I may have spent the rest of my life believing that they'd died," she said. "And now that I'm with them, I can't imagine how I could have lived the rest of my life without them."

"I'm sure they feel the same way," Sola replied.

Padmé nodded, and was about to reply when the image on the screen caught her attention. "It's Bail Organa!" she said. "He's under arrest!"

The two sisters watched in astonishment as the details of the story unfolded. And while Padmé was not surprised that he was involved in the Alliance, the fact that he'd been named by someone was.

Several security personnel were detained at the Kuat Drive Yard, where several acts of sabotage took place last month. After releasing more than half of those under suspicion, Lord Darth Vader took no time at all in learning the names of those involved in the cowardly attack upon the Empire's primary ship building facility. Among those named was Senator Bail Organa of Alderaan, who is believed to have links to the Rebel Alliance. Senator Organa was taken into custody today, while the remainder of the perpetrators was taken to Dathomir penal colony where they will await trial. In other news...

Padmé stopped listening at this point. *After releasing more than half of those under suspicion....those words reverberated in her mind. He showed mercy... he spared the lives of those men...* The thought that Vader had shown mercy moved her tremendously. Had her words had some affect on him? Was there a chance that there was enough humanity left in him that she could still reach him?

"Padmé? Did you hear me?"

Padmé looked at her sister. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"I said, what are you going to tell Leia?" she asked. "Organa was her father for ten years, wasn't he?"

Padmé nodded. “Yes, he was,” she replied. ‘I don’t know what to do, frankly,’ she added. “Leia has said very little about her life with them,” she continued. “She’s very happy in her new life, and I don’t want to stir up her emotions by telling her this.”

“But she’s bound to find out somehow,” Sola pointed out. “If he’s been indicted, then it will be in the news for a while.”

Padmé was silent, wishing once more that Vader was home to help her deal with this. “You’re right,” she sighed. “I just wish there was an easy way to tell her.”

“Tell me what, Mom?”

Padmé turned quickly, surprised by her daughter’s sudden appearance.

“Leia,” Padmé said. “This isn’t easy to tell you,” she began.

Leia frowned. “It is Daddy?” she asked, an edge of panic in her voice. “Please tell me it isn’t Daddy!”

“No, it isn’t him,” Padmé assured her. “It’s Senator Organa,” she continued.

Leia frowned. “What about him?” she asked, seemingly indifferent.

“He’s been arrested, Leia,” Padmé told her gently. “He’s been implicated as a Rebel sympathizer.”

Leia sat down as she digested that. She was silent for a long time, making both her mother and aunt nervous. “What will happen to him?” she asked finally.

“I don’t know,” Padmé told her. “I imagine there will be a trial,” she said, knowing what a travesty such a trial would be.

Leia nodded. “Did Dad arrest him?” she asked.

“I don’t think so,” Padmé replied. “He’s still at the drive yards,” she said.

“Right,” Leia said.

Padmé was concerned over her daughter’s lack of reaction, and looked at her sister briefly.

“Leia, honey, are you okay?” Sola asked, putting a hand on Leia’s shoulder.

Leia looked at her aunt and nodded. “I think so, yes,” she replied.

“This man was your father for ten years, Leia,” Sola reminded her.

“He was never my father,” Leia replied, bitterness creeping into her voice. “He lied to me, Aunt Sola; he told me my parents were dead. They both lied to me, and if my real father hadn’t figured out who I was, I would have spent the rest of my life believing their lies.”

“It’s natural that you’d be angry, Leia,” Padmé told her. “We were all lied to, all four of us.”

Leia looked up at her mother. “It’s so unfair,” she said angrily. ‘Luke and me spent ten years apart,’ she continued. “And you,” she added, “telling you that your babies had died... what kind of monster does that??” she cried.

Padmé had no answer for her daughter, for she shared her bitterness. And yet, Leia's anger concerned her. And worse, it reminded her of Leia's father.

"As far as I'm concerned he's getting what he deserves," Leia said finally, standing up. She left the room at this point, and ran down the hall to her room.

"I'm sorry," Sola said, "I shouldn't have said anything."

"No, it's okay," Padmé replied. "It was bound to come out. I'm more concerned about her reaction," she added with a frown.

"She's very angry," Sola said. "Not surprising, really."

Padmé shook her head. "No," she agreed. "But I've seen how dangerous anger can be," she added.

Sola nodded, an uneasy feeling creeping over her as she realized what Padmé was referring to. "I think you ought to talk to her father about this," she said finally. "Don't you?"

Padmé looked at her sister. "Yes," she replied at last. "I think you're right. I'll contact him tonight."

Star Destroyer Exactor

"Lord Vader, a word with you please," Captain Piett asked as Vader entered the bridge.

"Why haven't we left orbit yet?" Vader demanded.

"That was what I wished to discuss with you, sir," Piett replied nervously. 'I remembered that the number four tractor beam projector is malfunctioning,' he continued. "I thought that since we're here we might have it repaired."

Vader nodded, pleased that he'd had cause to promote the bright young officer. "Yes, an excellent idea, Piett," he said. "See to it once."

"Yes Milord," Piett replied, relieved that Vader approved of his plan.

"Keep up the good work, Captain," Vader replied as he left the bridge.

Piett was too astonished by the Dark Lord's praise to reply at once, for Vader was quite stingy with it. "Thank you, Lord Vader!" Piett called after him finally, finding his voice. He turned to his second in command, who seemed as shocked by Vader's praise as Piett himself was. "Carry on," Piett said, having discussed the plans with the officer earlier.

"Yes Captain," the lieutenant replied, and set to work at once.

Vader returned to his quarters to make a report to the emperor, hoping that his master would be pleased with his progress. It was Vader's hope that finally nailing Bail Organa would divert Palpatine's attention from the issue of Luke and Leia's blood tests, an issue that Vader had not yet found a solution to. There was simply no way he would let Palpatine know of the twins' inherent Force abilities, and had not dared to begin training them for that very reason. While Luke and Leia's abilities remained latent, Vader could shield them from Palpatine. But should they learn to use their powers, hiding them would be impossible. Giving the emperor falsified results was one option Vader had considered; giving him the blood of a non-Force sensitive was another. He knew that whatever he did the emperor would

not be fooled indefinitely; but that didn't concern him. He was confident that by then he himself would be ready to take on his master and destroy him once and for all. All he needed was to be patient; and patience had never been one of Vader's strengths.

It was a pleasant surprise to find that Palpatine was not within communication range, and so Vader merely left his report for the emperor to peruse once he returned. As he scrolled down the inbox, another surprise awaited him: a message from his wife. He opened it at once, his heart aching with longing when he saw her face.

*Hi, she began her uneasiness painfully clear. I guess you're off the ship... I just wanted to let you know that Leia has found out about Bail's arrest. Her reaction concerns me, and I could use some input. I don't know what your plans are, you left without telling me how long you'd be gone, but if you are nearby....*she stopped, uncharacteristically uncomfortable with her own words. *I know things were pretty ugly between us when you left, but I hope we can put that aside for Leia's sake. I regret some of the things I said, and I hope you're not still angry with me for saying them. Anyway, please contact me. Bye.* Her image faded from view, and Vader sat for a moment as indecision and doubt beset him. *Is she trying to reach out to me? Does she feel as horrible as I do about the way we parted?* Clearly his wife needed him, and he was not about to let her down.

Turning in his chair, Vader hailed the bridge, and was greeted within seconds by Captain Piett.

"Repairs are under way, sir," Piett reported. "We should be ready to leave within the next twelve hours."

"Understood," Vader replied. "Something has come up, and I must return to Coruscant. You will deliver the prisoners to Dathomir, Piett. I will rendezvous with you there in forty-eight hours."

"Of course sir," Piett replied calmly. "Shall I prepare a long range shuttle for your use?"

"Yes," Vader replied. "At once. I want to leave within the hour."

"I'll see to it personally, sir," Piett replied. "Bridge out."

Vader closed the transmission and left his quarters, anxious to be underway back home.

Coruscant

Padmé returned home with Captain Kassel, having seen her sister off on the early transport back to Naboo. She had tried to convince Sola to take a few more days off of work, but Sola was unable to. Being a senior member of the firm she worked for was demanding and her presence was needed in Theed that afternoon. Padmé had been grateful for the time she'd shared with Sola, however, and the two sisters vowed to get together again soon.

The house seemed unusually empty when Padmé returned home now that Sola was gone and the twins were in school.

"Is there anything you need, Milady?" Kassel asked.

"No, thank you Captain," she replied as she entered the office. She hadn't heard back from Vader yet, and was growing anxious. Was he ignoring her? Was he so angry now that he simply stopped talking to her altogether?

Kassel stood in the doorway as she checked her messages, knowing exactly what she was hoping to see. When she didn't see it, he walked away, feeling badly for her. He wanted to speak his mind, wanted to tell her what he knew was true: that Darth Vader loved her more than anything in the universe and that since her return to his life he seemed more alive than he had in years. But it wasn't his place to say such things, so all he could do was think them, and hope that things worked out for both of them.

Padmé scrolled through the rest of the messages, most of which were for her husband. Having read the few that were for her, she turned off the screen and stood up, wondering how she would spend her day. Turning around she gasped in surprise, for Vader was standing in the doorway watching her.

Chapter 51

Fifty-One

"I'm sorry," Vader said as he walked into the office. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"I wasn't expecting you," Padmé said in response. "What are you doing here? I thought you were at the Drive Yard."

"I was," Vader replied, walking towards her. "I left my ship when I got your message."

Padmé was shocked to hear it. "Really? But... don't you have things to do? I thought you were in the middle of an important mission. It's been all over the news."

"Has it?" he asked, moving closer to her.

Padmé nodded, willing herself not to think about what had happened between them in this very room, on the very desk she was now backed up against, mere days ago. "I heard about how you spared those men," she told him, feeling her heart hammering inside of her. 'I was relieved to hear it,' she told him. "It made me think that maybe you actually listened to what I said," she added, a tiny hint of a smile on her face.

"Is that so extraordinary?" Vader asked, amused by her comment.

"Yes," she replied at once. "You've always been very...single minded."

Vader nodded. "Something you know nothing of," he commented.

Padmé lifted her eyebrows. "No, not a thing," she replied.

He said nothing in reply, and for a moment they simply looked at one another, the only sound the mechanical sound of Vader's respirator. And then he did something that took Padmé completely by surprise; he lowered himself onto one knee before her, and looked up at her, as though in supplication.

"What are you doing?" she asked, growing alarmed, thinking something was amiss. 'What's wrong?'

"I'm doing something I should have done the instant I learned you were alive," he said, reaching out to take one of her hands. "I'm asking... no, not asking, begging you for forgiveness," he said.

Padmé didn't know what to say, for his apology was so unexpected that she simply looked at him, her emotions churning wildly.

"You weren't the only one who said hurtful things," she said finally. "I did too, and..."

"No, you don't understand," he said. 'It's not just the argument that I'm apologizing for,' he told her. "It's everything, it's the last ten years, it's what I did to you on Mustafar."

The thought of what he had done on that day forced all the emotions she'd been holding back for so long to the surface. "How could you?" she asked softly as her eyes filled with

tears. "How could you think I'd betray you?? That I'd brought Obi-Wan there to kill you? I would never do such a thing! I loved you! I only wanted to help you!"

Vader looked down, unable to look at her any more. "When I saw Kenobi, I...I snapped," he told her, his eyes cast downward. "I was insane, Padmé, I..."

"You thought I betrayed you," she finished for him. "And you tried to kill me for it, me and our babies that I was carrying."

Vader looked up at her. "I know what I did," he told her. 'And not a day has gone by since then that I haven't hated myself for it,' he continued. "I will never forgive myself for what I did," he added, feeling his eyes fill with tears. "I don't deserve your forgiveness," he said, looking down again. "I have no right to ask you for it. But I felt that I had to at least make the effort."

Padmé looked down at him, her heart aching with all the tumult of emotions this catharsis was releasing. And through it all, one thing was becoming clear to her: he *did* care about her. He *did* love her. And that made the past ten years, wasted, lonely years, that much harder to accept. Padmé couldn't say anything at this point, and didn't even try to hold back the sobs that burst forth. She lowered her face into her hands as the tears came, releasing the sorrow and the regret of the ten empty years in one great catharsis.

Vader watched as she broke down, his own eyes burning with tears. Slowly he stood up, not knowing if he ought to dare try to console her.

"I'm sorry," he said simply. 'I know that doesn't mean a lot in the big scheme of things,' he added, "but I will spend the rest of my life saying it if I must."

Padmé lowered her hands and looked up at him, her face streaked with tears. "You don't need to do that," she told him softly.

"Yes I do," he responded. "What I did to you was unconscionable," he continued.

"It was," she agreed. "But I forgave you for Mustafar a long time ago," she told him.

Vader stared at her, not sure he'd heard her correctly. "You... forgave me? After what I did??"

Padmé nodded. "Yes," she said. 'What I couldn't forgive was that you had caused the death of our babies,' she told him. "But once I learned that I'd been lied to... I let go of that. You were lied to as much as I was."

Vader nodded. Reaching out he touched her face tentatively, half expecting her to pull away from him. "I don't begin to understand how you can forgive me," he said, taking her face in his hand, "but I will spend my life trying to deserve it, if you'll permit me to."

"I don't think it will take that long," she told him, a trace of a smile returning to her face.

"No?"

"No," she replied. "Just promise me something," she asked.

"Anything," he replied at once.

"That you won't let Palpatine destroy our family again," she said to him.

“That is a promise I can make very easily,” he told her. “Palpatine’s days are numbered.”

“Good,” she replied.

“Is there anything else?” he asked.

Padmé looked up at him, wishing ardently that he didn’t need to wear the mask. “I need you,” she told him quietly. “All of you. I hate that we’re separated by all of this.”

“I hate it too,” he replied. “But it won’t be forever. I paid a visit to the planet Kamino before I went to the Drive Yards.”

Padmé’s eyes widened. “You did?” she asked. “You had them take the samples needed to start the regeneration procedure?” she asked hopefully.

Vader nodded. “Yes,” he told her. ‘I have begun the process,’ he told her. “Hopefully in a few months I will be able to live without all this.”

“You will,” she told him. ‘I’m so excited,’ she continued with a smile. She hesitated for a moment, and then added, “I wish I could kiss you right now.”

“So do I,” he told her, and then ran one thumb over her mouth, as an idea came to him. “Close your eyes,” he told her.

Padmé wasn’t sure why he was asking her to do so, but she complied. At once she felt the sensation of a warm mouth upon hers, and a tender kiss. She opened her eyes at once, astonished. “How did you do that?” she asked.

“The power of suggestion,” Vader replied. “Your mind is very open to mine right now,” he explained.

Padmé nodded in understanding. “Do it again,” she said, closing her eyes once again.

Vader took her face in his hands as he focused his mind on her beautiful mouth, wanting more than anything to be able to truly kiss her. But for now, this would have to suffice.

Padmé was astonished at how he could move her so easily with merely his mind.

Vader smiled under his mask, loving how her body responded to him, even telepathically.

“That feels amazing,” she sighed as she felt the sensation of his mouth move down to the side of her neck. The fact that he could project what he wanted to do to her onto her mind really wasn’t that surprising considering how powerful his mind control had always been.

“I’ve missed you,” she told him.

“It’s only been a few days, Padmé,” he teased her.

Padmé laughed in reply. “You know what I mean,” she said. “The past ten years.”

Vader nodded. “I’ve been in Hell without you,” he told her.

“So have I,” she told him.

“I love you, Padmé,” he told her as he took her face in his hands. “I’ve always loved you,” he added.

Padmé smiled. "I know," she replied. She brought her arms up and wrapped them around his neck as best she could. "I love you too," she told him softly.

Vader lifted her gently and sat down with her in the chair. "You were concerned about Leia," he reminded her as he stroked her shoulder. "What was her reaction to Organa's arrest?"

Padmé frowned. "She was rather indifferent at first," she replied. "And then Sola mentioned to her that..."

"Sola?" Vader interjected. "She was here?"

"Yes, she came to visit," Padmé explained. "And she reminded Leia that Organa had been her father for ten years, and that's when Leia became angry."

"Angry over his arrest?"

"No, angry that he'd lied to her, and to me. She said he was never her father, and that he was getting what he deserved," Padmé told him.

Vader was silent for a moment before responding. "She's right," he said finally. "He is getting what he deserves."

"Yes, he is," Padmé agreed. 'But Leia's anger... it concerns me.' She didn't want to say why, didn't want to anger him in this perfect moment they were sharing. But then, she felt she needed to risk it, for Leia's well being was more important than the risk of making him angry. "Anger can be dangerous," she said tentatively. "You and I both know that."

Vader nodded, knowing what she was saying without actually saying it. "It's natural for her to be angry, Padmé," he told her at last. "Leia has been remarkably accepting of the changes in her life. It was only a matter of time before she vented her true feelings. You and I have already expressed our outrage over what happened; the children need to as well, it's only natural for them to do so."

"I know," Padmé said. 'Perhaps we ought to talk to her when she gets home,' she suggested. "Let her talk it out. That will hopefully make her feel better."

"Yes," he replied. 'I must go and interrogate Organa today,' he told her. "I need to have a valid reason for diverting to Coruscant."

"I see," Padmé replied. "Do you need to go right now?" she asked.

Vader knew that he ought to, but he was enjoying her company so much that he hated the thought of leaving her just yet. "I will," he told her. "Later, much later."

Padmé smiled, and simply rested in his arms, deciding that for now, this was as perfect as life could be.

Later that afternoon

Luke and Leia knew that something was going on the moment they saw their mother's face. She seemed happier than she had in days, and they hoped that they knew the reason for it.

"Dad's home, isn't he?" Leia asked her mother as she and Luke climbed into the speeder.

Padmé looked back at her. “Yes he is,” she replied.

Luke and Leia looked at one another knowingly.

“What was that look for?” Padmé asked, having seen the exchange in the rear view mirror.

“Nothing,” Leia assured her.

“Nothing?” Padmé repeated.

“It’s just that we were hoping Dad was coming home today,” Luke explained.

Padmé nodded, not believing him for a moment. “I wasn’t expecting him,” she told them. “He decided to surprise us I guess.”

“Cool surprise,” Luke said with a smile.

Padmé smiled, agreeing with her son whole heartedly.

Vader had spent a good portion of the afternoon in his hyperbaric chamber in meditation. He smiled when he thought of how excited Padme had been to hear about his trip to Kamino. Vader found that he was smiling a lot more lately than he had in the previous ten years, and he knew that his family was the reason for that. They were changing him; there was no doubt of it. And it made him start to question who he truly was now.

Padmé had been calling him Anakin since returning to his life; and while that didn’t surprise him, it had made him feel uncomfortable. He had rejected the name of Anakin Skywalker ten years earlier, as well as everything he stood for. He had come to believe, at the encouragement of his master, that Anakin Skywalker stood for weakness, while Darth Vader represented unlimited power. Skywalker was a traitor, while Vader was the hero of the Empire. *But if the Empire is evil, then what does that make Vader?* He reflected with growing uneasiness. *Anakin Skywalker loved and cherished Padmé and Darth Vader attacked her and almost killed her,* he realized. *So who are you, then? Are you either? Or both? Who does she need you to be?* The fact that she’d used his former name exclusively since their reunion made it clear who she needed him to be. The question was, could he be Anakin Skywalker now? Was he entrenched so deeply in the Darkness now that Skywalker could never exist again?

Almost as though in response to his silent musing, Vader’s comm signaled an incoming message. He frowned when he saw that it was the emperor, knowing that the conversation was inevitable. Replacing his mask and helmet, Vader braced himself, raising his mental shields in order to face the evil thing that he called Master.

“Where’s Dad?” Luke asked as soon as they entered the building.

“He was resting earlier,” Padmé told him as she entered the lift. “He’s been working very hard lately, and I worry about his health.”

Leia frowned, concerned. “Why are you worried?” she asked.

“You know his health is quite delicate,” she replied. “I just worry that he’s overdoing it sometimes.”

Luke and Leia looked at one another with a smile.

“You love him a lot,” Leia stated confidently.

Padmé looked at her daughter with a smile. “Is that what you think?”

“That’s what we know,” Luke piped up.

Padmé merely smiled in response.

Chapter 52

Fifty-two

“What is thy bidding, my master?”

Palpatine smiled as he looked down upon his supplicant apprentice. “You have done well, Lord Vader,” he began, surprising Vader with his praise.

“Thank you, my master,” Vader replied. “The *Exactor* is on its way to Dathomir with the perpetrators.”

Palpatine nodded. “And why are you not on board?” he asked. “Why have you returned to Coruscant? Don’t tell me your wife has drawn you home,” he asked sarcastically.

“No,” Vader lied smoothly. “My wife wants nothing to do with me.”

Palpatine smiled. “How frustrating it must be for you living with her,” he said in mock sympathy. “I know how you weak you are still when it comes to her.”

Vader carefully controlled his reaction to this, and allowed himself a brief flash of anger. “Very frustrating,” he said.

Palpatine’s smile grew. “No doubt she wasn’t appreciative of your attack upon her,” he commented.

“No, she was not,” Vader replied.

“All in all, it may have been better had you killed her after all,” Palpatine remarked, watching his servant closely for his reaction.

To his credit, Vader was able to hide the rage and hatred he felt at hearing this callous remark. “Perhaps so,” he said finally. “At any rate, I returned to the capital in order to interrogate Senator Organa.”

“Ah yes,” Palpatine replied. ‘Your nemesis,’ he commented. “Have you done so?”

“No, not yet,” Vader replied. “I was on my way to do so when you contacted me, Master.”

Palpatine nodded. “Do not kill him, Vader,” he commanded. ‘No matter how much you want to, I want Organa alive. He is a vital key to finding the Rebel base of operations,’ he explained. “We need him alive, at least for now.”

“I understand,” Vader replied. “I will leave him alive.”

Palpatine smiled sourly. “I will enjoy hearing your report,” he commented.

Vader bowed as the transmission ended. Hatred for the emperor surged through him, sending dark energy crackling around him like static electricity. And then he felt a surge of warmth break through it, dispersing the darkness as a pebble disturbs the calm surface of a pond. Standing up, he turned to the door, knowing what it was he felt: his family was home.

“Dad!”

Vader turned and saw his children running down the corridor towards him, their faces and auras bright with excitement and love. He held open his arms to them, looking forward ardently to the day when he could truly embrace them.

“I’m so glad you’re home!” Luke said, looking up at his father with naked adoration. ‘Are you here for long?’

“I’m not certain, Luke,” Vader replied. “I hope so.” He looked at Leia next. “I trust you have both been behaving yourselves,” he said.

Leia nodded. “Aunt Sola was here for a visit,” she told her father.

“So I’ve heard,” Vader replied, looking up at his wife next.

“She invited us to Naboo,” Padmé told him. “She thought Luke and Leia would like the lake district.”

Vader nodded, memories of that glorious place still vivid in his mind. “I’m sure they would,” he replied. ‘But the timing for such a trip isn’t optimal,’ he added. “Perhaps... in a few months time,” he added.

Padmé knew what he was referring to and nodded in understanding. “Yes, I agree,” she said. “That will give Luke plenty of time to practice his swimming so that he can swim out to the island,” she added, looking at Luke with a smile.

“That sounds awesome!” Luke replied with a smile.

“The lake is cold, Luke,” Vader warned him. “Very, very cold.”

The smile faded from Luke’s face. “Cold?” he asked. “Really?”

Vader nodded solemnly. “Extremely.”

Padmé and Leia looked at one another and rolled their eyes.

“There is something I need to attend to,” Vader told his children. “I’ll be back in a few hours.”

“You’re going to question the Viceroy, aren’t you?” Leia asked as Vader started to walk away.

Vader stopped and turned back to his daughter. She wore an inscrutable expression on her face. “Yes, I am,” he told her, judging it senseless to lie.

Leia nodded. “Are you going to kill him?” she asked a brief flash of emotions in her dark eyes.

“No,” Vader replied at once. “I am only interrogating him.”

If Leia was relieved to hear this, she didn’t show it, which concerned both of her parents equally.

“Come along,” Padmé said to the twins, “time to get to your homework. You two have a test tomorrow, remember?”

Luke and Leia nodded, and then headed down the corridor to their rooms.

"We will talk with Leia when I return," Vader told his wife. "I sense great conflict in her."

Padmé nodded. "Yes, I'm sure you do," she said. "Don't be long," she said.

"I'll do my best," he told her, and then turned and walked away.

Coruscant central detention center

Bail Organa was beginning to grow nervous. He had been incarcerated for more than twenty-four hours and no one had come to question him yet. This made him wonder if there would even be an interrogation, or if he would simply be sentenced summarily like so many others were. *Mothma tried to warn me that this operation was a big gamble, he thought regretfully; but I was too stubborn to listen. And now the entire future of the Rebellion has been jeopardized.*

Organa stood up and paced in his small cell. *Well they won't get any information from me, he thought resolutely. They can kill me if they must, but I will not divulge the Alliance's secrets to them. We've come too far to give in to them now...*

The sound of his cell door opening shook Organa from his reflections, and he looked up, a feeling of dread filling him instantly when he saw Darth Vader walk through the door.

"Vader," Organa spat. "Don't think I don't know what this is truly all about," he said acrimoniously. "This has nothing to do with that incident at Kuat, and everything to do with Leia."

Vader folded his arms over his chest. "It was not Leia who named you as the coordinator of the attacks on the ship yards," he stated simply. "Each one of four men named you, Viceroy," he continued. "I'd say that's a rather strong implication of guilt."

Organa looked away, unable to face Vader any longer. "Go to Hell," he muttered in frustration.

"Perhaps I shall one day," Vader remarked. "But not before emptying your mind of any and all information that I might find of use."

"I don't know what you expect me to tell you," Organa said, folding his arms over his chest stubbornly. "I don't know those men, and I have no idea why they named me."

"Don't take me for an idiot, Viceroy," Vader snarled, closing the distance between them quickly. "I've known for years that you were involved in the Rebel Alliance, all I needed was the proof. And now that I have it, I'm going to make sure you don't see the light of day for the rest of your pathetic life."

Organa turned to him with a derisive smirk. "My life's pathetic, Vader?" he retorted. "At least I'm not half machine," he said. "At least my wife doesn't hate me the way yours hates you."

Vader moved quickly. "Be careful, Viceroy," he warned, lifting Organa off the ground easily with one hand. "You're treading a very fine line between life and death right now. I would suggest you leave my wife out of our conversation. It's much safer that way."

Organa frowned; surprised that Vader hadn't killed him for his comment. "The truth hurts, doesn't it?" he said with a smile.

"What do you know of truth?" Vader spat. 'You who lied to a child about her parents her entire life,' he continued, "who told a woman her newborn infants were dead?"

"I only did so to protect them," Organa retorted. "Something you should have been doing but were too busy slaughtering Jedi!"

"Enough!" Vader snapped. 'I am not here to discuss the past,' he stated angrily. "I want information, and I want it now."

Organa said nothing, and turned away, only to have Vader take him roughly by the arm and yank him around.

"Where is he?" Vader demanded. "Where is that lying coward, Obi-Wan Kenobi?"

Vader residence

Padmé watched her daughter pick at her dinner, her mind clearly far from the dinner table where she sat with her mother and brother. It didn't take a Force sensitive to know what was preoccupying her.

"And then he fell right on his butt!" Luke concluded, laughing uproariously at the anecdote he'd just shared with his mother. 'It was the funniest thing I've ever seen, Mom!'

Padmé smiled at her son, his sheer love of life filling her heart with joy. "It certainly sounds funny, Luke," she said. "But what if it had been you and not him?"

Luke shook his head. "No way, Mom," he said. 'I'm the best gymnast in the class. Well, Leia's as good as me,' he added, looking at his sister. "But there's no way I'd ever fall like he did."

Padmé was certain that both her children were as agile as their father had been once, as *he will be again*, she reminded herself. She hadn't told the twins about Kamino, and wasn't sure if she ought to. No doubt Vader himself would want to be the one to tell them. She could only imagine how excited they'd be when they found out.

"Leia, are you all right?" Padmé finally asked when she saw her daughter push her plate away finally.

Leia looked up at her mother. "I'm not hungry," she said quietly. "May I go to my room and study?"

Padmé nodded, and Leia stood up at once and left the room.

Luke turned and watched her go before looking back at Padmé. "She's worried," he told her. "She's thinking about Dad interrogating her old dad."

"You mean the viceroy," Padmé said, not wanting to think of Organa as Leia's father.

Luke nodded. "She's confused, Mom," he explained. 'On the one hand she is mad at the viceroy for lying to her,' he continued. "But part of her still cares about him, and doesn't want to see him get hurt," he concluded. He frowned and was silent for a moment. "I think I know how she feels," he said finally. "I feel mad that Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru lied to me," he

told his mother, “but I still miss them, and feel bad for being angry since they’re dead now,” he said quietly.

Padmé reached over the table and put her hand on his. “Luke you have every right to feel angry,” she told him. “Don’t feel guilty for doing so. We were all lied to by people we trusted. It’s natural to feel angry about such a betrayal.”

Luke nodded, and looked up at her. “Even if they’re dead?” he asked.

Padmé squeezed his hand. “Yes,” she assured him.

Luke felt better, and pondered his mother’s words as he cleaned his plate.

Padmé looked at her wrist chrono, wondering when her husband would get home, hoping things were not going as badly as she feared they were.

Detention block.

Vader had deftly deflected Organa’s mind from the topic that he’d truly come to interrogate him about. And in the brief moment of shock that Organa felt upon hearing Kenobi’s name, Vader learned a great deal.

“What makes you think I have any knowledge about General Kenobi?” Organa said at last, starting at last to grow truly fearful. Vader had tricked him thoroughly and effectively, and he hated him for it.

Vader said nothing in response, his mind sifting through the jumble of emotions and information that he had just gathered from Organa’s unsuspecting mind. “I know you and Kenobi have been working in collusion all this time,” he said finally. ‘You worked together to lie to Padmé, and to steal our infants from her,’ he continued, an angry edge to his voice. “I know Kenobi, Viceroy,” Vader stated. “I know that in his twisted sense of righteousness my wife and children don’t belong with me,” he added. “And I highly suspect that he will do his utmost to steal them from me once more, no doubt with your help.”

Organa smirked. “How can I help anyone if in rotting in a jail cell?” he asked.

“You can’t,” Vader replied. “But Kenobi is very canny, very resourceful. I know that so long as he lives he represents a danger to the security of my family.”

Organa shook his head. “This has nothing to do with your family, Vader,” he snapped. “You want revenge, pure and simple. You want to finish the job of wiping out the Jedi that you started ten years ago. I’m sure it’s just eaten away at you all these years that Obi-Wan bested you that he escaped and has been out of your grasp all this time. That’s what this is really about. Don’t try to fool me by trying to make me think you actually care anything about Padmé or her children.”

Vader’s hand moved so quickly that Organa didn’t even notice until he felt it around his throat. “For some reason the emperor wants you alive,” Vader growled, “otherwise you’d be dead right now. But make no mistake, I will find Kenobi, as well as the rebel scum you associate with. That’s a promise,” he told him, releasing him and sending him across the room roughly. With that he left, leaving Organa more than a little shaken by the encounter.

The twins were just getting to bed by the time their father returned home. Stepping off the lift, Vader turned to see his wife coming towards him.

“Well?” she asked.

“Well, Organa was as arrogant and insufferable as ever,” Vader told her.

Padmé nodded. “Not surprising,” she replied. ‘Come on,’ she said, taking his hand. “The kids are going to bed. Come and say goodnight to them.”

Vader allowed his wife to lead him down the corridor to the twins’ rooms where they found Luke demonstrating to his sister the proper way to do a back flip. Leia smiled when she saw them enter the room and waited for Luke to sense their presence. He did so momentarily, and ended up landing squarely on his behind.

“Hurts, doesn’t it?” Vader asked his red-faced son.

“Yeah, it does,” Luke said, standing up and rubbing his tender bottom.

Leia giggled at her brother as he limped his way to his bed.

“Are you prepared for your test tomorrow?” Vader asked them as Luke climbed into bed.

“I am,” Leia said, standing up from the floor where she’d been watching her brother’s antics.

“What about you, Luke?” Padmé asked.

“Piece of cake,” Luke assured her.

“That’s what you said the last time,” Vader reminded him. “And you scored a less than acceptable grade.”

“I got a B minus!” Luke protested.

“Like I said, less than acceptable,” Vader repeated.

Luke lowered his eyes. “Yes sir,” he mumbled. “I’ll do better on this one. I promise.”

Vader nodded and turned to his wife. “Let’s just hope back flips aren’t on the test,” he quipped, making Padmé and Leia both laugh and Luke’s face turn redder.

“Goodnight Luke,” Padmé said, coming over and giving her son a kiss.

“Night Mom,” Luke replied, snuggling under the covers. “Night Dad,” he added as Vader bent to tousle the boy’s hair affectionately.

“Sleep well, son,” Vader said.

Vader and Padmé followed Leia into her room, watching her as she climbed into her bed. Vader could sense that she was doing her best not to ask him about the interrogation, but that she dearly wanted to know what had transpired.

“Is there something you want to talk about, Leia?” Padmé asked her as she sat on the edge of her bed.

Leia looked at her mother, and then up at her father. “Did you get the information you needed from the viceroy?” she asked him.

Vader nodded. "Some of it," he told her. "He is not very forthcoming, and tried to deny his involvement in the Rebel Alliance."

"Figures," Leia said. "Is he going to prison, Daddy?"

"It's very possible, yes," Vader replied. "He's committed a serious crime against the Empire by being involved with traitors, Leia. The Empire doesn't tolerate treachery."

Leia nodded, a slight frown forming on her brow. "Part of me is mad at him," she told her parents. 'Really mad. He lied to me, he lied to Mom,' she continued. "And kept me hidden from you," she added, looking up at Vader.

"Yes he did," Padmé agreed. "But your feelings are more complicated than that, aren't they?"

Leia nodded again. "Is it possible to be really angry at someone but still care about them?" she asked.

"Yes, entirely possible," Padmé said.

"You have every right to be angry, Leia," Vader told her. "Don't try to deny your true feelings."

"I'm not," Leia replied. "I guess I'm just...confused."

"That's natural," Padmé assured her. "Feelings aren't cut and dried, Leia. It's seldom so simple."

Leia nodded. "What will happen to Queen Breha if he goes to prison?" she asked. "She won't go too, will she?"

"Only if she's implicated in any wrong doing," Vader told her. "I doubt she's had anything to do with his involvement with the Alliance."

"Okay," Leia replied, feeling a little better.

"Time for sleep," Padmé said, leaning over to kiss Leia. "Goodnight sweetheart."

"Goodnight Mom," Leia replied. "Goodnight Daddy," she added, looking up at him.

"Good night young one," Vader replied. "Sleep well."

Padmé and Vader left their children's room and walked down the corridor to the living room where they sat down together.

"Kenobi is here," he told her without preamble. "He's on Coruscant."

Padmé's eyes widened. "Bail told you that?"

"No, but I saw it in his mind," Vader replied. 'I have dispatched troops to find him,' he continued. "I have waited a long time to meet up with him again."

Padmé nodded. "I'm sure," she said. "You mean to kill him, don't you?" she asked.

"He deserves nothing less," he replied at once. "I would think you'd feel that way as well."

Padmé frowned. "I hate violence, you know that," she said. "And as much as I hate him for what he did, I don't know that killing him is right."

Vader was silent as he fought the anger her words elicited within him. "What would you have me do, then?" he asked. "Let him go free after all he's done to us? To our family?"

"I didn't say that," she replied, seeing that he was growing angry. "Perhaps there is a less violent solution, one that would benefit you as well."

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"I'm talking about you and Obi-Wan calling a truce," she replied. "Working together like you used to before Palpatine destroyed everything."

"Never, that will *never* happen, Padmé," Vader replied hotly. "I can't believe you'd even consider such a thing after what he did to us!"

"What if he agreed to help you destroy Palpatine?" she said. "Would you feel differently then?" she asked.

Vader said nothing for a moment, and stood up. "What makes you think he'd help me?" he asked her as he paced across the room. "I don't need to remind you what he did to me the last time we met," he added bitterly.

"No, you don't," she replied. "But this is different. You said yourself you couldn't destroy Palpatine so long as you're confined to this suit and respirator. With Obi-Wan's help you could," she continued. "And I have no doubt that he wants Palpatine dead as much as we do," she added.

Vader folded his arms over his chest as he pondered this. He had held on to his anger for ten years, had looked forward to meeting his former master and friend again and destroying him this time. He deserved revenge, he wanted revenge; but what his wife said made sense. As much as he hated to admit it, he needed Obi-Wan Kenobi.

"You can ask him when he is apprehended," Vader said at last. "I have told the troops to bring him here to me. Hopefully his sense of guilt over what he did to you will force him to agree."

Padmé smiled. "I'm counting on it," she told him.

"Very well," Vader said. "I will leave it to you to propose your plan."

"He will do it," she said, standing up and walking over to him. "It's not just me he feels guilty over, I'm sure."

Vader nodded, putting his hands on her shoulders. "Finding him won't be easy," he said, playing with the hair that brushed her shoulders. "He's very resourceful."

"Yes," she agreed. "But he doesn't know he's being looked for," she reminded him. "Why is he on Coruscant, anyway?"

"He and Organa had some elaborate scheme to take you and the twins from me," he told her.

Padmé frowned. "As if we'd ever leave you," she said.

Vader's hands moved up to her face. "No? You're happy with me here?"

"Things aren't perfect," she replied, "but I love you, and I want to be with you. We belong together, Ani, no matter what."

Vader nodded. "I don't know what I did to deserve a second chance with you," he said. "But I promise you I won't make you regret those feelings."

She smiled. "I know," she responded.

"Perhaps we ought to think about getting some rest," he told her. "It's been a rather long day."

"Yes it has," she agreed. "A very eventful one too."

Vader nodded in agreement. "Sweet dreams, Angel," he told her, stroking her face softly.

Chapter 53

Fifty-three

Vader found it difficult to fall asleep that night. Although he knew that it would be prudent to show restraint where his wife was concerned, he found that he couldn't get thoughts of her out of his mind, the longing for her out of his blood. He never could get enough of her, and now, after living without her for ten years, the longing he'd always felt for her was only magnified a thousand fold. *But you'll kill yourself if you give in to your desire for her every time you want her*, he reflected. And as much as he was certain Padmé understood that, he knew that she was as frustrated as he was. And why wouldn't she be? She was a young, vibrant woman; she needed a man who could give her what she needed. *And right now that's not you*, he told himself bitterly. The fact that in a few months things would be different was of little comfort. Turning his mind to Padmé now, Vader sensed that she was asleep. Remembering how she'd responded to his telepathic connection to her earlier, he had an idea.

Padmé had fallen asleep rather quickly, for the day had been a long one, and she'd been up early to see off her sister. She was dreaming about nothing interesting when her dream suddenly took a rather interesting turn....

Padmé found herself back on Naboo, in the lake district, walking through the very field where she and Anakin had spent so many wonderful times together. She stood for a moment and looked out at the splendid vista before her, the sound of the distant waterfall soothing and comforting in its familiarity.

"Hello Angel."

Padmé turned quickly, startled by the voice, and was shocked to see Anakin standing there. He was whole again, his face unmasked and perfect, his hands flesh hands again.

"How is this possible?" she asked. "You haven't had the surgery yet!"

Anakin smiled at her, and walked over to take her hands. "This is a dream, Padmé," he told her. "Anything is possible in dreams." He brought each of her hands to his mouth and kissed them slowly.

Padmé looked confused for a moment, and then a look of understanding came over her. "Are you doing this?" she asked him. "Are you making this dream?"

"Well, sort of," he told her with a smile. "Is that okay? I'll leave if you want me to," he told her.

Padmé shook her head. "No, don't leave," she told him, reaching up and taking his face in her hands. 'I've missed your face so much,' she told him, stroking his face softly. "I've wanted to do this for a long time," she added, pulling him down to her to kiss him deeply on the mouth...

The next morning

It was early the next morning when Vader received the message he'd been anticipating: Kenobi had been arrested. He made a mental note to promote the commander of the squadron that had found him trying to board a small, anonymous craft at one of Coruscant's smaller transport stations. The element of surprise had been the key to his quick arrest, for even the canny old Jedi had not suspected that Vader knew of his presence on the capital. According to the brief report Vader had received, Kenobi had not resisted arrest, and came along quite peacefully. *Old fool*, Vader thought as he headed towards the dining room to tell his wife of the news. *Ever the peace loving Jedi, aren't you Kenobi? Well this time you won't escape*, he vowed; *this time you won't win*.

Padmé looked up from her cup of tea when she heard Vader enter the room. "Good morning," she said with a smile.

"Good morning," he replied, taking a seat beside her.

"I had the most incredible dream last night," she told him.

"Is that so?" he asked, reaching over and taking her hand. 'You must tell me all about it,' he added. "But first I must tell you something. Kenobi has been arrested."

Padmé's surprise showed in her eyes. "So soon?" she replied. "That was very fast," she commented.

"I dispatched an entire squadron to the task of finding him," he told her. "And it seems they did so just as he was about to board a ship off of the planet."

Padmé nodded. "Are they bringing him here?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied. "I told them to detain him long enough so that the twins won't be home when he arrives," he added.

"Good thinking," she replied. "I don't think this is going to be pretty," she added with a frown.

"I can promise you it won't be," he assured her.

"Morning!" Luke said cheerfully as he bounded into the room followed by his sister who seemed far less enthused to be out of bed.

"Good morning Luke," Padmé replied. "You too Leia," she added.

Leia just gave her parents a little smile in return, followed by a large yawn.

"Rough night?" Padmé asked her daughter.

"I didn't sleep very well," Leia replied. "I kept having weird dreams."

"What kind of dreams?" Vader asked.

"Just... weird," Leia said. "Disjointed, not really anything I can describe, really."

"Probably your anxieties manifesting themselves," Vader told her, hoping that was all there was to it. "Our minds have a way of trying to work out problems in our dreams."

Padmé nodded a hint of a smile on her face as she thought back to her own dream the previous night.

“Well I dreamed about pancakes,” Luke declared, helping himself to a rather large stack of them. “And what do you know? Here they are!”

Padmé and Leia laughed, while Vader observed his son with a smile.

“Prophetic vision, my son,” he said dryly.

Luke merely nodded with a smile as he enjoyed his meal.

A short time later

Obi-Wan Kenobi sat in the back of the imperial transport vessel, binders on his wrists and on his ankles, surrounded by a dozen clone troopers. If he weren't so apprehensive about what was about to happen he may have found the situation amusing. He could recall occasions where he had been in far worse predicaments and had managed to escape unscathed. *But that was because Anakin was at your side, saving your skin*, he reminded himself. The irony was not lost on him now, as he knew exactly where the transport was taking him. The only thing that did puzzle him was why it wasn't the Imperial palace. Why was Vader meeting him in his own home, rather than taking him to the emperor? Surely Vader would revel in bringing one of the only Jedi left in existence to his emperor; so why wasn't he? *I suppose time will tell*, he told himself, summoning the living Force to remain calm as the transport made its final approach to the complex that Vader called home.

“Stand up, Jedi,” the clone that seemed to be in charge barked at Obi-Wan as the craft landed. Obi-Wan complied, and shuffled slowly out of the hold, keenly aware of the number of weapons that were trained on him. He had no intention of fleeing, however, and simply allowed the troopers to direct him through the large hangar towards a lift, where he was pushed inside, his ever present guards joining him.

As the lift drew closer to its destination, Kenobi could feel the presence of the man he'd once called brother; Vader's force signature was unmistakable both in its potency and its darkness. And yet, to his surprise, there was conflict within the darkness. *No, that's wishful thinking*, he told himself. After what he'd seen on Mustafar, Kenobi knew that Anakin Skywalker was gone forever.

Upstairs, Padmé and Vader were waiting in the office for Kenobi to arrive. Padmé watched as Vader paced up and down in the room, his agitation obvious.

“He's here,” Vader told her finally, turning and looking at her.

Padmé nodded, not doubting for a moment that he was right. Even after all their years apart, and all the ill will that they bore one another, the link between the former best friends was still strong. Padmé stood up to join her husband as the lift doors opened, and the group of clones ushered their prisoner down the corridor towards the lord and lady of the manor.

Obi-Wan entered the room and stopped in his tracks when he saw Padmé. He had not anticipated seeing her, and could see at once in her eyes the level of animosity she bore him.

“Obi-Wan Kenobi,” Vader said, walking over to him. “We meet again at last,” he added mockingly.

“Vader,” Kenobi said, the name leaving a bitter taste in his mouth. ‘Padmé,’ he said, turning to her next. “I hope you haven't been mistreated,” he added.

Padmé frowned. “Your concern is most touching, General,” she said coldly. “But you’ll forgive me if I don’t want it. After what you did to me on Pollis Massa I find it rather hard to stomach.”

Obi-Wan nodded, her bitterness not at all surprising. He lowered his eyes, unable to face her any longer. “I did what I thought was best,” he told her quietly. “If I erred, then I apologize. But the risk of losing the twins was simply too great, Padmé. I...”

“Enough!” Vader roared. ‘Do not dare to justify what you have done to this family, Kenobi,’ he growled. “Your pathetic excuses mean nothing to us. There is nothing you can say to justify what you did by lying to Padmé the way you did and taking our children away from her. Nothing!”

Obi-Wan remained calm, which only irritated Vader more. “If you’ve brought me here to kill me, then by all means,” he said finally. ‘Be done with it. There’s nothing I can say to you to excuse what I’ve done,’ he said. “To either of you,”

“No, there isn’t,” Padmé said, stepping forward. ‘And neither of us can ever forgive you for the pain you’ve inflicted, both physical and emotional,’ she added. “But there is something you can do to help atone for what you’ve done; that is, if you’re interested in atonement.”

Obi-Wan looked at her, surprised and intrigued at once by her words. “What are you talking about?” he asked, looking from her to Vader.

“I mean Palpatine,” Padmé replied.

Obi-Wan frowned. “The emperor? What about him?”

“I mean to kill him,” Vader told him. “And I need you to help me do it.”

Obi-Wan was too shocked to reply, for this was the very last thing he’d expected Vader to say. Why would Vader want the emperor dead?? But before he had a chance to respond, the door opened and Captain Kassel appeared. Vader looked up, not pleased at the interruption.

“What is it?” he demanded.

“I’m sorry to intrude sir,” Kassel replied, ‘but there’s an envoy here from the emperor, sir,’ he said. “It’s about the blood samples!”

Vader looked down at Padmé, both of them filled with alarm and fear.

“What are we going to do?” she asked him fearfully.

“Don’t worry,” Vader told her, taking her face in his hands. “I will *not* give into his demands,” he assured her.

“But if he doesn’t get blood samples today he’ll be angry with you,” she countered. “I won’t let him punish you, not again, not ever.”

“I will speak to him,” Vader replied. “Perhaps he will...”

“You know exactly what will happen if you go there empty handed,” she interjected. “He may very well kill you!”

Obi-Wan stood by in astonished silence as he witnessed this exchange. It seemed quite clear that Vader and Padmé cared very deeply for each other, as well as for their twins.

"I have an idea," Padmé said at last. 'Give the envoy my blood,' she told Vader. "The DNA matches, and there's no trace of medichlorians!"

Vader shook his head, the idea disturbing him. "No, I won't let you do that," he insisted. "I will deal with this," he added.

"You said yourself you needed to buy some time," Padmé said. "This is the perfect way to do it. What harm can it do me? I have plenty of blood," she told him with a smile.

Vader looked down at her. "You're not going to let go of this, are you?" he asked.

Padmé shook her head.

"Very well," he replied. 'Let's do it.' He looked up, suddenly remembering Kenobi. "Take him back to his cell," he instructed the clones, "and summon the medidroid," he told Kassel.

"At once, sir," Kassel replied.

Kenobi was lead out of the room, the scene he'd just witnessed making him question everything he thought to be true about Darth Vader. It had been the fear of both he and Yoda that if Vader knew about the twins his wife had given birth to that he would take them and hand them over to his master. But clearly they were wrong. Clearly Vader would do anything to protect Luke and Leia, even face the emperor's wrath. *Has he changed? Is there a chance that Anakin Skywalker is alive and well inside that black armor?* The fact that Padmé seemed to genuinely love Vader made Kenobi realize that this was no ploy; she was incapable of such deception. Her fear was genuine, and so was Vader's. Their love for one another was genuine, as was their love and concern for their children. *So what now, Vader? If I help you kill Palpatine, what then? Will you renounce the Dark Side and become Anakin Skywalker once more? Or are you simply using this situation to gain control of the Empire you've always lusted for?* Kenobi realized that he'd have time to meditate upon this unexpected turn of events as he was brought back to his holding cell, and welcomed the chance to do so. He only wished Yoda were here to guide him; *but he isn't*, he told himself. *This is one time you'll have to rely on your own judgment, Obi-Wan. Don't mess it up this time.*

The medidroid was quick as it withdrew two small vials of blood from Padmé. Following Vader's instructions, it labeled one vial M for male, and one F for female. It then handed them to Vader, who held them for a moment before leaving. He looked up at Padmé, as though needing her permission to do this.

"You'd better hurry before he starts to grow suspicious," she told him.

"I'll make sure he isn't," he assured her. "I'll be right back."

Padmé nodded and watched him leave the room, hoping with all her might that their ruse would fool the emperor long enough for Vader to formulate a plan. *Help us, Obi-Wan Kenobi*, she thought desperately, *you're our only hope.*

Chapter 54

Fifty-Four

“So do you think he’ll do it?” Padmé asked Vader once they were alone once more.

Vader sat down beside her. “I don’t know,” he replied. ‘I wasn’t able to read him,’ he told her. He was silent for a moment. “I will give him twenty-four hours,” he said finally. “Before I force the issue.”

Padmé frowned, knowing exactly what he meant by his remark. “What about Bail?” she asked.

“I did not have time to interrogate him,” he explained. “I was more interested in finding Kenobi at that point.”

Padmé nodded. “I only hope he decides to help you,” she said. “I hate the thought of you taking on that monster alone.”

“If I can delay it until after the surgery I will,” he told her. “But I cannot say for certain that I will be afforded that luxury.”

“I can’t wait for that to happen,” she told him. “I can’t even imagine what it must be like living in that thing.”

“It isn’t easy, I assure you,” he replied. “The smallest tasks that most people take for granted are enormously challenging.”

“I’m sure,” she said. “How do you... eat?” she asked.

“With tubes, mostly,” he told her. ‘I take in nutrients more than actually eat. Eating requires removing all this,’ he said, indicating the bottom portion of his mask. “And that’s something of a hassle.”

Padmé frowned. “That’s terrible,” she said. ‘I’d be happy to help you with it like I did before when we... well, you know,’ she said with a smile. “If you’d actually like to eat something.”

Vader could sense how anxious his wife was, how apprehensive. He shared her feelings, and knew that in her own way she was trying to distract him from the stressful situation they’d found themselves in. She’d always managed to soothe him when he felt upset or anxious, and she could see right now that he needed some tlc; and what was more, she needed to give it.

“That sounds wonderful,” he said at last. “Thank you, Angel.”

Imperial Palace

“Your majesty, we have the blood samples.”

Palpatine looked up from his breakfast to the red robed guard who stood in the room. "Have them analyzed at once," he said. "I want the results in my hands within the hour."

"Yes your majesty," the guard replied with a bow.

Palpatine returned to his meal, a smile spreading over his face as he did so. He was certain that Vader had fudged the blood tests. And that was fine with him; it would give him the justification he needed to do what he'd wanted to do all along: take Vader's children from him. And once he had them, Vader would be expendable. *Today is going to be a good day*, the old man thought gleefully, *a red letter day indeed*.

Vader residence

"Now taste this one," Padmé instructed. "The berries are just perfect right now."

Vader obediently complied, and was pleasantly surprised by the sweetness of the fruit. "That's wonderful," he told her.

Padmé smiled. "I remember picking these in the fields behind my parents' home," she told him. "We'd eat so many we'd be too full for our dinner," she remembered.

"I can't imagine you doing anything so naughty," he replied with a smile.

Padmé lifted her eyebrows. "No?" she asked.

Vader chuckled. "Well, perhaps I ought to... rephrase that," he said.

Padmé laughed. "I love hearing you laugh," she said. "And I love feeding you," she added, popping another berry into his mouth, followed by a kiss.

Vader ran his hand up her back, feeling happier than he had in a very long time. The simple fact that she could accept him this way, that she wanted to be with him simply to enjoy his company meant a great deal to him. He knew now that he would never take a simple thing such as sharing a bowl of ripe berries with his wife ever again, for she had somehow turned such a simple event into something magical.

"Looks like we've reached the bottom of the bowl," she told him.

Vader looked into the bowl. "I wonder how that happened," he commented.

Padmé laughed. "I can't imagine," she said.

Vader looked at her, wondering how she could bear to be with him unmasked as he was.

"It's pretty awful, isn't it?" he asked her finally.

"What is? I can get more berries," she said.

"My face," he said. "My face is awful. I don't know how you can stand to look at me, much less kiss me."

Padmé frowned. "Don't say that," she said, placing one small hand on his face. "I don't care what you look like."

"I know you don't," he replied. "But even so; it is pretty horrible."

Padmé sighed. “So you’re not as handsome as you once were,” she admitted. “But I love you every bit as much,” she added.

Vader shook his head in astonishment. “I can’t imagine why,” he said.

Padmé hated hearing him talk this way, but reasoned that it wasn’t surprising that he would be self-conscious given all that had happened. “Have the twins seen your face?” she asked.

“No,” he told them. ‘Only in the holo of our wedding,’ he added. “They came close once though,” he told her with a smile, and then proceeded to tell them about how they’d opened his pod on one occasion when he’d been inside of it.

Padmé laughed, not at all surprised by the twins’ hijinx. “I’m just glad they didn’t decide to try that again recently,” she said.

Vader nodded. “That would have been rather... embarrassing.”

“Yes, very,” she said.

“Of course, they’re at school now,” he told her.

Padmé nodded. “Yes,” she replied. “No chance of that happening right now.”

“No, there isn’t,” he agreed, running his hand up into her hair, his eyes straying down to her mouth. He moved towards her, capturing her mouth in a soft kiss. “Just as sweet as berries,” he told her with a smile.

Padmé smiled, and set the bowl down on the control panel. “Sure about that?” she asked, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Maybe I need another taste,” he said, kissing her again.

Imperial Palace

The phlebotomists that Palpatine had employed worked feverishly to fulfill the emperor’s order. The trouble was, they had no idea what medichlorians were, so they had no idea what it was they were supposed to look for. None of them wanted to ask the emperor what they were, for fear of his angry reprisal, and so they ran every imaginable test they could think of in the hopes that something unusual would turn up.

Veslack Academy

Uh oh, I didn’t study this, Luke thought in a panic as he looked at the second page of the test. *I didn’t know this would be on the test!* He looked up and scanned the room, noting with dismay how furiously everyone was writing away at their test. *Am I the only one stuck on this question?* He groaned inwardly. And then he caught his sister’s eye and smiled as an idea entered his head.

Leia, what did you get for question three?

Forget it Luke, that’s cheating.

No it’s not! I just want to compare answers.

Nice try, it’s still cheating.

Why do you have to be such a goodie two shoes all the time?

To Luke's utter irritation Leia smiled at this and returned nothing to him.

Oh great, ignore me. I'm telling Dad on you.

What are you going to tell him? That I wouldn't let you cheat or that you didn't study enough?

Luke had no answer to this, and lowered his brows angrily at his sister, who merely continued to smile.

You stink, Leia, you know that?

Silence.

I know you can hear me.

More silence.

If you don't tell me I'm going to tell Gerrard that you like him.

This garnered a slight response, as Leia's brow creased ever so slightly. Luke smiled.

I know you do, he pressed. And if you don't tell me the answer I'm going to tell him at recess.

*Oh so now you need me to **tell** you the answer. I thought you wanted to **compare** answers!*

So I lied. Now gimme the answer!

Leia sighed, wondering if it was possible for a twin brother to be adopted. *I do **not** like him*, she returned to him. *And if you try to blackmail me again **I'll** tell Dad on **you**.*

This shut Luke up, and he glared at his sister before returning to the question that had him stumped.

Vader Residence

"Captain Piett has signaled, sir," Kassel told Vader once he'd emerged from his quarters. Kassel had learned to turn a blind eye to much of what went on in the Vader household recently, and so had not thought anything of seeing Lady Vader return to her own quarters with half of the buttons on her blouse missing. In fact, it explained a lot, including the change in Vader's disposition lately.

"Did the prisoner transfer go smoothly?" Vader asked.

"Yes sir," Kassel replied. "He was asking for orders, sir."

"Tell him to return here," Vader replied. "I will not be able to rendezvous with the *Exactor* now that the Viceroy has been arrested."

"Understood sir," Kassel replied. "Will you be interrogating him this afternoon?"

"Yes," Vader replied. "I'm on my way right now. Have you seen my wife?"

"Uh... she looked like she was going to her quarters sir," he replied.

Vader nodded, sensing Kassel's uneasiness. "Something the matter, Captain?" he asked.

"No sir," Kassel replied at once.

"Carry on then," Vader said, walking away and heading towards Padmé's quarters.

Kassel walked away in the opposite direction, a smile on his face.

Padmé was just leaving her quarters when Vader appeared. "Hello," she said with a smile. "Were you looking for me?"

Vader nodded. "Only to let you know that I'm leaving," he told her.

The smile faded from Padmé's face. "Where are you going?" she asked.

"To continue my interrogation of Viceroy Organa," he told her. 'This could mean the end of the Rebellion,' he continued. "I'm certain he knows the location of the rebel base," he explained.

"Yes, I'm sure he does," she agreed, remembering the key role Organa had played in the Delegation of 2000. "Do you have to go today? I'm a little anxious about the blood samples."

"There's no need to be," he assured her. "He's looking for medichlorians, and he'll find none. There's nothing for you to worry about, I promise you," he told her, touching her face gently.

Padmé nodded. "Okay," she replied. "I guess I'm just a little jumpy when it comes to Palpatine."

"Understandably so," he replied. 'I won't be gone long,' he told her, taking her face into his hands. "That was amazing earlier," he told her.

Padmé smiled. "It was," she agreed.

"I can't seem to get enough of you," he told her, stroking her face softly.

Padmé's smile grew. "I know the feeling," she replied.

Vader nodded. "I'll be home later," he said, releasing her.

"Bye," she said, and then watched him walk away, hoping that his hatred for Bail Organa wouldn't lead him to do something regrettable.

Imperial Palace

Palpatine was growing angrier by the second as he waited for the results of the blood tests he'd ordered. It had been more than two hours, and there was still no word from the lab. The thought that perhaps the technicians didn't know what they were looking for had crossed his mind; but he decided to let them work it out, judging that he was paying them enough to guarantee some ingenuity.

Finally a red robed guard entered the room where Palpatine sat in brooding, meditative silence. He looked up expectantly.

"The phlebotomist in charge of the testing would like to speak to you, your majesty," the guard told him.

Palpatine frowned. "Why? What is the problem?"
'I'm not certain, sir,' the guard replied. "Perhaps he'd better explain it to you."

"Show him in," Palpatine snapped.

The guard bowed deeply and then left the room, only to return moments later with a rather nervous looking man in a white lab coat.

"What is the problem?" Palpatine demanded. 'Speak!'
"Well, your majesty," the man began nervously, "it seems that the blood sample has no trace of the unusual agent you were looking for," he began. "At first we weren't quite sure what to look for, but after some investigation in the Imperial medical network, and taking a closer look at Lord Vader's own blood sample that we have on record, we finally isolated the factor referred to as medichlorians."

"And there's none in their blood?" Palpatine asked. "Neither of them? Not a trace?"

"No sire, not a trace," the man replied. "But there's something peculiar about the samples that I think you ought to know," he continued.

"And what is that?"

"It seems that the blood samples are from the same individual," he explained, "for the DNA strands are identical, as are all the levels of a particular hormone that we found in both samples, a hormone one wouldn't expect to find in the blood of ten year old children."

"What are you blathering about?" Palpatine snapped, not wishing to admit that the man was talking over his head.

"I'm talking about human chorionic gonadotropin," the man explained. "It's a pregnancy hormone, your majesty. Whoever it was that donated these blood samples is most definitely pregnant."

Chapter 55

Fifty-Five

Palpatine stood up slowly, staring at the man with growing astonishment. “Pregnant??” he said. “Are you certain??”

The man nodded. “Yes, there’s no doubt of it,” he replied. “We ran the test a second time to be certain,” he added.

Palpatine nodded, too stunned for a moment to say anything. His mind worked furiously, piecing together the unexpected turn of events and determining what he ought to do about it. *Why Lord Vader*, he thought with a smirk, *I didn’t know you were up to the challenge*, he mused bitterly. And then he smiled. “Get out,” he told the technician. The man left at once, only too happy to be out of the emperor’s menacing presence.

“I want a dozen guards,” Palpatine told the one guard present. “Prepare a transport. We’re leaving in thirty minutes.”

“Yes your majesty,” the guard replied, and left the room to do his emperor’s bidding.

Detention Center

Bail Organa looked up as the security field outside his door was removed. Shortly thereafter, Darth Vader entered the room, followed by a clone with an interrogation droid. Organa swallowed hard, not having considered what awaited him until now.

“I trust you’ve been comfortable, Viceroy,” Vader remarked icily.

Organa just looked up at him without saying a word.

“You might be interested to know that your traitorous colleague has been apprehended,” Vader continued as the clone prepared the torture device.

“Congratulations,” Organa said snidely.

“It wasn’t difficult actually,” Vader replied. “Clearly Kenobi isn’t the man he once was.”

“I guess you know what that’s like, don’t you Vader?” Organa retorted.

Vader said nothing, not allowing the viceroy to get under his skin. “We have a lot to discuss, Viceroy,” he said, changing the subject.

“I have nothing to say to you, Vader,” Organa replied, looking away petulantly.

“I beg to differ,” Vader replied. ‘I’m certain you have a great deal to say,’ he continued. “All you need is the proper motivation,” he added menacingly. He turned to the clone and motioned for him to proceed, and at once the torture droid began moving forward, its long needle gleaming menacingly.

Organa looked at the droid, doing his best not to allow the terror he felt to show.

“And now, Viceroy, we will discuss the location of your hidden Rebel base,” Vader said as the clone held Organa immobile while the needle moved closer to its target.

Veslack Academy

Leia carried her lunch tray towards the table where her friends sat when she saw her brother sitting at a table looking rather glum. She stopped and hesitated for a moment, and then proceeded to walk to where Luke sat.

“Something wrong?” she asked as she slid into the seat across from him.

“Why would you care?” he grumbled.

“Because I’m your sister,” she replied.

“Yeah, like that matters,” he muttered.

“Are you still mad?” she asked.

“Why would I be mad?” Luke asked.

Leia rolled her eyes. “Because I wouldn’t help you cheat on the test,” she replied.

“Oh, that,” he said. “It’s okay. When Dad grounds me for failing the test I won’t blame you.”

“That’s nice of you,” Leia replied, knowing just how to irritate her brother.

Luke looked up at her and was about to make a curt remark when several friends joined them.

Vader Residence

Padmé had spent a good part of the afternoon enjoying the enormous recreational facilities in the lower level. She had tried her best not to think about what Vader was doing, about just how he was going to get the information he wanted from Bail Organa. She knew enough about Imperial procedure to know that there would no doubt be truth serum involved, and, quite possibly, torture. In her mind she couldn’t reconcile the man who would stop at nothing to learn the location of the rebel base with the one who she’d shared such a beautiful morning with. It was as though there were two men living within him, each one struggling for dominance. It gave Padmé hope that there was conflict within him, for it meant that Anakin Skywalker was still alive. And so long as he was, she had hope that he would come back to her.

After her workout, Padmé decided to go for a swim. It had always relaxed her, and right now she needed to relax. There was a lot pressing on her mind as she waited for Vader to return. At the back of her mind she couldn’t stop worrying about how the emperor would react to the negative blood tests. *He has to believe them*, she thought desperately; *this has to work*.

And then there was Obi-Wan Kenobi. Vader had decided to give him twenty-four hours to make his decision. *What if he says no? What if he doesn’t want to help Ani? What if Ani has to face Palpatine alone?*

Worries and anxieties beset Padmé as she swam laps in the pool. *If only it were all over, she thought, if only Palpatine were dead and Anakin was healed...*

"Excuse me, Miss Padmé," Threepio said, entering the pool deck. "Lunch is ready."

"Thanks Threepio," she called back. "I'll be right up."

Captain Kassel had almost finished putting his tools away when a ship entered the hangar bay. He recognized it at once as a royal yacht of the emperor's fleet. *The blood tests*, he thought fearfully; *Lady Vader...*

Leaving his tools, Kassel stood up and ran to the lift, his heart hammering in his chest. He picked up his comlink from his belt as he stepped onto the lift and activated it quickly, keying in Vader's personal frequency. He received no answer, and looked down at the small screen. Vader's comlink was set on away status, which meant he had turned it off. *He's interrogating Organa*, Kassel remembered anxiously, realizing why Vader had not permitted anyone to interrupt him. *Damn it, what am I supposed to do?*

"Lady Vader!" Kassel yelled as he ran off the lift. "Lady Vader where are you?"

Padmé, who had just sat down to lunch, looked up in alarm at the tone of panic in the young officer's voice. She stood up and walked over to the doorway. "I'm right here," she called to him. "What's going on?"

"Milady, there are royal guards here," he told her, trying not to scare her.

Padmé's heart started to hammer inside of her. "Why?? What do they want??" she asked.

"I don't know," Kassel replied, "But I want you to hide. Now."

"You're scaring me, Jon," she said. "Why should I hide?"

"Perhaps you should have listened to the young captain."

Kassel and Padmé turned around to see Palpatine at the end of the corridor, flanked by royal guards. Kassel immediately pushed Padmé behind him, shielding her with his body. "Your majesty," he said. "What can I do for you?"

Palpatine looked up at the young officer with contempt. "You can stand aside and allow me to congratulate Lady Vader," he said as he and the guards walked towards them. 'It seems the beautiful lady is expecting a child,' he added with a repulsive smile. "And I wanted to be the first to offer my best wishes."

Padmé listened in silent shock, not believing what he was saying, thinking he'd finally gone completely mad; and then she remembered the blood sample. *Oh no... what have I done?*

Kassel glanced back at her briefly before turning back to the emperor. "I've sworn my life to protecting Lady Vader," he said. "I'll die to protect her if I must."

Palpatine looked at the young officer and then shrugged. "If you insist," he replied, motioning to one of the guards nearby. At once the guard raised his weapon and fired at Kassel, hitting him squarely in the chest. Padmé screamed in horror as her young protector fell to the floor.

“Now, Lady Vader,” Palpatine said, walking towards her. ‘Come with us, if you please,’ he said as she was surrounded by guards. “We want to make sure your baby is well cared for,” he added with a sinister smile.

Padmé offered no resistance as the red robed guards took her into custody, but in her mind she was screaming out for help to the one person she knew could hear her.

Detention Center

“Anakin! Help me!!”

Vader heard the cry in his mind as clearly as if the person calling him had been in the room with him. At once he stood up, ignoring everything else that was going on around him. *Padmé...*

The clone assisting him looked up in alarm as Vader suddenly stood up and started for the door.

“Lord Vader?” the clone asked.

Vader turned back briefly. “We’ll... continue tomorrow,” he said and left the room, leaving the clone more than a little confused. He ran out of the detention block, holding on desperately to his connection with Padmé, not caring about Bail Organa or the Rebel Alliance or anything else except her. *What’s wrong, Padmé? What’s happening?*

But he received no answer, which told him that she was either incapable of responding or that she was being guarded by someone with the ability to shield her thoughts. Picking up his comlink, he hailed Kassel, ready to blast the officer for letting harm come to Padmé. But there was no response, which only made Vader more fearful. *What has happened to her??* He thought desperately as he jumped into his speeder. He fought for control of his emotions in order to focus on her, to try and learn something, anything, about her situation. And then he felt it; the loathsome, fetid presence of the thing he called master. *He has her*, he realized in terror; *the monster has my angel*. Rage filled Vader at this realization, and it took all his self control to steer the craft. He needed to think clearly if he was to find her and save her from Palpatine; and yet, the emperor’s abduction of her made no sense to him. Why her? Why not the twins? He knew that they, thankfully, were safe at school. All along it had been them he’d worried about, and yet it was Padmé that Palpatine had singled out. Why?? *No matter the reason, he’ll pay for this*, Vader thought angrily. *Your end is near, my master*, he vowed. *I hope you’re ready to die.*

“Solo, where are you?” Vader said into this comlink.

“The school, sir,” Solo replied. “Like always.”

“I want you to bring Luke and Leia home at once,” Vader commanded. “Tell them I’ll explain when they get here.”

A moment of confused silence, and then, “Right away, sir. Solo out.”

Veslack Academy

Luke and Leia had almost finished eating their lunch when a strong tremor in the Force was felt by both of them. They looked up at one another at the same time, each seeing fear in the other’s eyes.

“What’s going on?” Leia asked her twin. “Something is wrong, Luke. Very wrong!”

Luke nodded. “I know,” he said with a frown. “I feel it too,” he told her. They both took a moment to focus as their father had taught them, and then realized what was wrong.

“Mom!” they both said simultaneously.

“Luke, Leia, time to go.”

The twins looked up to see Han Solo standing there.

“Your dad wants you home,” he explained as they stood up.

“Something has happened to our mother, hasn’t it?” Luke asked Han.

“I don’t know kid,” Han replied. “All I know is he wants you home, so let’s go.”

The twins went with him without question, both anxious to get home, each hoping their intuition was wrong.

Vader residence

Vader sensed the unmistakable Force presence left behind by his master as he stepped off the lift. It was quiet within the complex, far too quiet for his liking. There was something else that he sensed as well: Padmé was gone.

“Kassel!” Vader bellowed as he started down the corridor. “Where in the hell...” he stopped when he saw a body lying on the floor at the far end of the hall. He walked over to it and knelt on one knee to check for a pulse. There was none. No doubt the young captain had given his life in an effort to protect Padmé, for it looked as though he’d been killed with a force pike. And there was only one group of being who used the lethal weapon: Imperial guards. Rage filled Vader as he rose to his feet.

“Oh my,” Threepio cried as he stepped into the corridor. ‘Is it safe to come out now, Lord Vader?’

Vader nodded. “Do you know what happened here?” he asked the droid.

“There were Imperial guards here, sir,” the droid reported. ‘And the emperor himself! They came for Miss Padmé, sir,’ he explained. “Captain Kassel tried to prevent them from taking her, but, as you can see, he was unsuccessful.”

Vader looked down at the young captain’s lifeless body. “He was little more than a boy,” he said, more to himself than the droid, his fists clenching angrily.

“Dad!! Dad are you home?”

Vader turned to see his children running down the corridor towards him.

“Where’s Mom?” Leia asked, the fear evident in her eyes.

“We sensed that something was wrong with her,” Luke added.

Vader was not surprised at all that they had sensed Padmé’s distress. “Your mother has been abducted by the emperor,” he told them.

“NO!!” the twins cried, knowing how dangerous the emperor was.

“I will find her,” Vader assured them, putting a hand on a shoulder of each child. ‘I promise you.’ He looked up at Han. “Look after them,” he said.

Han nodded.

“Dad, where are you going?” Luke asked, coming after him.

“I’m going to kill the emperor,” Vader told his son. “I’m going to make him pay for this, Luke. I need you to stay here where you’re safe. Do you understand?”

Luke nodded, willing himself not to cry. Leia joined her brother and together they watched their father run down the corridor and disappear into the lift.

“He’ll be okay, right Han?” Leia asked as Han came to stand with the twins.

Han nodded. “Yeah, he’ll be okay,” he said, hoping that he was right, not knowing what would become of this family if he weren’t.

Chapter 56

Fifty-Six

Imperial Palace

Padmé fought hard to remain calm as the imperial guards escorted her to a cell. She was still in a state of shock over learning that she was pregnant, and the words of her sister came back to her mind. The thought of having another child excited her, particularly since she had missed out on Luke and Leia's infancy. And yet, her life was so very complicated right now, *and my baby's father is still a Sith*, she reminded herself. But perhaps this was the way back; perhaps becoming a father again would help Vader return to the Light. Having Luke and Leia in his life had already brought him closer to it; perhaps another child would draw him yet closer.

Standing up, Padmé paced around in the small room. She was trying not to think about why Palpatine wanted her, for there was only one reason she could come up with. *He wants my baby*, she thought, running a hand over her abdomen. *He means to take my baby from me...*

Padmé looked over to the door when she heard it slide open, and braced herself as Palpatine appeared in the door.

"I hope you haven't been too uncomfortable," he said to her.

"Not at all," she said. "Are all your jail cells this cozy?"

Palpatine smiled. "I am having quarters made for you," he told her. "This is merely temporary."

Padmé shook her head. "You're mad if you think my husband won't seek revenge for this," she told him.

"Oh, I'm counting on it," Palpatine told her, his smile growing. 'Vader has grown soft since you and your offspring entered his life,' he said with a sneer. "He has outlived his usefulness. Now that you are carrying his child, I will no longer need him. So I am counting on a confrontation with him. It will make it far easier to dispose of him."

Padmé felt a chill go down her spine at the man's words. "You... you mean to kill him," she said quietly. "Don't you?"

"But of course," Palpatine replied. 'Do you really think that I have simply accepted how he has changed? That I approve of his new role of loving father and devoted husband?' He cackled merrily at this, making Padmé's skin crawl. "It was my original plan to take the twins from him," he continued. "But then you came back, and things got complicated. But now you've given me the perfect solution. I will have a new, unaffected child, a pure Sith from the day he is born," he continued. "He will be my new apprentice, replacing his father even before he is born."

Padmé stared at him, his words sending cold fear coursing through her veins. “You’ll never have my child,” she told him, her dark eyes full of hatred. “Never!”

“My dear lady, there will be no one to stop me,” he told her with a smile. ‘By the time this child is born, your devoted husband will be long dead.’ He let these words sink in before he turned to leave her. “I’ll go and check on your quarters,” he told her, turning back. “An expectant mother needs more comfortable accommodations than this,” he added with a smile, and then turned and left her.

Padmé sat down on the small cot, unable to stop the trembling that had beset her.

Elsewhere on Coruscant

Vader flew like a man possessed to the detention center. The dream he’d had recently came to his mind as he did so. In his dream Palpatine had taken Padmé....*because she was pregnant... is that why he has done this?? But how could he know, even if it’s true??* And then he remembered: the blood samples. *That’s why he’s taken her, he learned that she’s pregnant from her blood...* The fact that Padmé was carrying his child filled him with immense joy, but the joy was tainted by the anger he felt over her abduction. *You won’t take my child*, Vader vowed as he landed his craft. *And you’ll die for daring to try.*

“Can I help you, Lord Vader?” the young officer said, standing as Vader entered the facility.

“I’m here to see the Jedi prisoner,” Vader said. “Show me to his cell.”

“Right this way, sir.”

Obi-Wan Kenobi had been in meditation since being returned to his cell. He sensed that something was amiss, but wasn’t certain what it was. Vader was very angry, as angry as he’d been on Mustafar, perhaps even more so. *Something has happened to Padmé*, Kenobi thought with grim certainty.

Kenobi looked up when he sensed Vader close by and was not at all surprised when the door to his cell opened and the dark lord entered the room.

“Palpatine has abducted Padmé,” Vader said without preamble.

Kenobi stood up. “How has this happened?” he asked.

“I wasn’t home when he came,” he explained. ‘He brought his red robes and they killed her protector,’ Vader said. “She’s pregnant, Kenobi — that is why he took her. He’s after our child.”

Kenobi frowned. “Pregnant?” he asked. “Are you sure? I mean... I didn’t think that was even possible now.”

“I assure you that it is very possible,” Vader retorted. “There are parts of me that are still fully human, old man,” he added bitterly.

Kenobi looked away, embarrassed. “Yes, well, obviously,” he muttered.

“You must help me get her back,” Vader went on, walking closer to his former master. “You must help me kill Palpatine.”

Kenobi looked up at Vader as doubts beset him. While he had no doubts that Vader was telling the truth about Padmé's abduction, he still had to question the dark lord's motives for asking for his help. *Is he leading me into a trap? Will he turn the tables on me just as he's planning to do to Palpatine? How can I trust a man who slaughtered younglings??*

Vader could see how conflicted Kenobi was. And while it didn't surprise him, it frustrated him tremendously. "I know you hate me for what I've become," Vader continued, "and quite frankly I don't give a damn. But if you ever cared about Padmé at all, you will help me now. I can't take on the emperor alone."

"I don't hate you, Anakin," Kenobi said at last. "But I don't trust you. Not after everything you've done, not after..."

"Damn it, Kenobi!" Vader interjected hotly. "Can't you just put the past aside for now? If I'm willing to do so, if I'm willing to forget for now that you left me to burn to death, that you lied to my wife about our babies, then why can't you forget my transgressions?"

I don't know why, that's the problem... if this is a trap, then all hope is lost, if it isn't, then it could be my only chance to atone for all that I've done. If only I knew the truth. Force help me make the right choice!

Vader residence

Han Solo had seen that his friend Jon Kassel was removed from the house, his body taken away by the coroner's office. In Vader's absence, it had fallen to Han to tell the dead officer's parents of his demise. *What a waste*, Han thought as he ended the transmission after telling Jon's parents what a brave man he'd been and how he'd died in the line of duty. *Some consolation that is to them*, he reflected bitterly as he walked to the living room to join the twins. *All they care about is that their youngest son is dead. The fact that he died in the line of duty means jack squat to them right now.*

Luke and Leia looked up as Han entered the room. Both had been very quiet, very edgy since their father had left the home more than an hour earlier. They were, naturally, very concerned about their mother; but knowing that their father was going to confront the emperor, were equally worried about him.

"Any word from Dad yet?" Luke asked.

Han shook his head as he sat down across from the twins. "Afraid not, kid," he said.

"What's going to happen, Han?" Leia asked fearfully. "I know you have some idea. Please don't keep us in the dark."

Interesting choice of words, Han mused. "All I know is that your dad is going to confront the emperor," he told her. "What that means... I can't say for sure."

Luke and Leia knew exactly what it meant. "Dad means to kill the emperor," Luke said. "I'm sure of it."

Han shrugged. "Yeah, probably Luke," he said. 'He loves your mom a lot,' he continued. "I think he'd kill anyone who tried to hurt her."

"Yes he would," Leia agreed. "But can Dad beat the emperor? I mean, is he stronger than him?"

Han sighed. "I honestly can't answer that one," he said.

Luke and Leia looked at one another, both thinking the same thing; we *could lose both our parents today...*

Imperial Palace

Padmé had been moved to a more comfortable room, but there was a guard outside, and it was, in her opinion, still a jail cell. She had begun to worry about Vader, for she knew that when he found out what had happened to her he would come to find her. And when he did that, he would be drawn into a confrontation with Palpatine. *He can't win a fight like that alone*, she thought desperately; *not in his current condition. Obi-Wan has got to help him!*

The door slid open and a clone entered with a tray of food. Without saying a word to her, he set it down on the small table in the room and then left. Padmé wasn't the least bit hungry; her mind was too occupied with what was happening. The door slid open again, and this time it was the emperor who entered a royal guard at his side. Padmé looked away from him, unable to stomach the sight of his face.

"Come now, Lady Vader," Palpatine said, "you must eat now. Remember you're eating for two."

"I'm not hungry," she informed him coolly.

Palpatine smiled. "You will be, in time," he assured her. 'I thought you might want to know that your dear husband has entered the palace,' he said. Padmé looked up at him at once, unable to hide her fear. Palpatine's smile only grew. "Yes, I thought that might get your attention," he mused. "I've ensured that he find his way quite easily to my private offices, where he will meet his end."

Padmé shook his head. "He will kill you for this," she spat.

"Oh, my dear lady, I'm sure that is what you wish for," he replied condescendingly. "But you and I both know Vader is in no condition physically to win a battle against me, despite the fact that he has been able to... function in other capacities," he added sourly.

Padmé looked away again, the hatred she felt for the emperor leaving a bitter taste in her mouth. "Leave me alone," she said quietly.

"As you wish," Palpatine said, with a mocking bow. 'I will be back to tell you of the demise of your beloved,' he added as he walked to the door. "Perhaps there is something black in that closet you might wear for a mourning gown."

Padmé looked back as the door shut once more. She stood up, rage filling her, and threw the tray of food at the door with a shout of frustration. On the other side of the door, Palpatine merely laughed in response.

Elsewhere in the Imperial Palace

Palpatine sat waiting in his office, the lights turned down low. He smiled, the anticipation of the approaching confrontation filling him. Reaching out with the Force, he was struck with the anger that emanated from his apprentice, who was very close by. Palpatine smiled. *That's it, my treacherous young apprentice*, he thought; *let the hate flow through you...*

The door to the emperor's inner sanctum opened, and Vader appeared in the doorway, his lightsaber in his hand.

"Where is she, Sidious?" Vader said without preamble, walking toward the emperor. "Where is my wife?"

"She is quite comfortable, I promise you," Palpatine replied. "After all, a woman in her condition needs to be well cared for."

So she is pregnant, Vader thought, his fears increasing. "Release her to me now," he said, "or you won't live to see another day."

Palpatine cackled upon hearing this. "Come now, Lord Vader," he said in a patronizing tone. 'You are half machine,' he taunted. "Surely you don't expect to best me. To be honest, I was quite surprised to learn that your wife was with child. Perhaps it isn't your child, though;" he continued, driving the knife deeper. "Perhaps that brave young man who died protecting her was the real father of her child."

Vader knew that Palpatine was doing his best to taunt him, and didn't react. "I'm not here to talk, Sidious," he said finally. "I'm here to kill you," he added, igniting his weapon and walking towards Palpatine menacingly.

Chapter 57

Fifty-seven

Palpatine stood up slowly, his eyes fixed on the red blade that hummed menacingly.

“I’ve been expecting you, Lord Vader,” he said. ‘You’ve grown soft since your children have entered your life,’ he stated, “since your wife has been fulfilling your carnal desires,” he added with a sneer.

“They have given my life meaning again,” Vader countered, watching his master move around the desk slowly. “Something that has been missing since I swore my allegiance to you.”

Palpatine’s eyes narrowed. “You are most ungrateful, Vader,” he snapped. “After all I’ve done for you, this is the thanks I get?”

The emperor’s words filled Vader with fresh rage. “All you have done??” he repeated. “You used me, lied to me and destroyed my life! What thanks do I owe you, my master, except this?” he asked, bringing his blade up to an attack position. Palpatine brought his own blade to a similar stance, and for a moment master and apprentice stared at one another.

“You can’t beat me, Vader,” Palpatine told him in a condescending tone. “I’ve made sure of that for ten years now.”

“Yes, so I have come to realize,” Vader replied angrily. ‘You lied to me about my injuries, like you lied to me about everything! But the lies end here, Sidious,’ he told him. “I’m going to make sure of it.”

“All you will accomplish in trying to kill me is to die trying, Vader,” Palpatine taunted. ‘And then your offspring will be in my hands. I can promise you that they will be well trained,’ he added with a smile. “And as for Padmé, once she has birthed this new child her usefulness will be over. I’ll make sure she dies with the knowledge that her progeny will carry on the Sith forever.”

“Your over confidence has always been your weakness, your majesty.”

Palpatine was startled by the voice, and was angered to see Obi-Wan Kenobi emerge from the secret corridor behind his office.

“A weakness of the Sith, I’ve noticed,” Kenobi added, producing his own weapon and igniting it.

Palpatine was shocked to see Kenobi, particularly since it appeared he was fighting on the side of Vader, and for a moment he wasn’t sure what to do.

“You seem rather surprised to see General Kenobi, Master,” Vader said, taking the opportunity to bring his blade up to strike at Palpatine, who managed to meet it with his own blade.

"It is no matter," Palpatine sneered as he lifted his hand and pushed Obi-Wan away easily with a blast of Sith lightning. 'No Jedi is a match for the Sith,' he added, turning his attention to Vader once more. "I've been waiting for this day, Vader," he sneered as Obi-Wan struggled to his feet. "The day you are replaced by your own child."

"If I must die today, then I'm taking you with me," Vader countered, lunging at Palpatine viciously. Obi-Wan joined in the battle, reminiscent of the days when he and his best friend would take on a common foe. Both men were surprised that they were still able to anticipate the other's moves, and it wasn't long before they pressed the advantage over the emperor.

"You can't win, Sidious," Vader taunted as he saw the old man begin to tire. "This day will be long remembered as the end of tyranny," he continued. "The end of your reign of terror."

Vader's words angered Palpatine, who had not anticipated Kenobi's involvement. His arrival had certainly got in the way of Palpatine's plans.

"Enough of this nonsense," Palpatine said finally, deciding it was time to put an end to this. "You will pay for your treachery now, Skywalker," he said, throwing a lethal blast of Sith lightning at Vader. Vader blocked it with his saber as Kenobi attacked the emperor from the other side. Palpatine sensed Kenobi's move and sent him flying across the room with a massive force push. Obi-Wan stuck his head against the edge of the desk and blacked out, leaving Vader to battle the emperor alone.

Vader was growing exhausted, the physical exertion more than he could handle. He back pedaled, trying to give himself a chance to regain his strength, but the emperor was relentless, having gained fresh life now that it was but one foe he was battling. Lifting his hands again, he sent another blast of energy at Vader, who was now struggling to control the blast with his weapon. He felt as though his lungs were on fire, his heart about to explode; but he also knew that the only way to ensure his family's safety was to kill this thing before him. And so he hung on as long as he could, before falling to his knees from sheer fatigue. Palpatine smiled.

"Young fool," Palpatine sneered. 'Young, weak fool,' he continued, advancing upon Vader. "Your feeble skills are no match for mine," he added. "You will now pay the price for your treachery," he concluded, lifting his hands to deliver a powerful blast of sith lightening straight at Vader. No longer able to fight back, Vader felt the full brunt of the attack, which seriously compromised his breathing apparatus. *Forgive me, Angel*, he thought as he felt the energy drain from his battered body, *forgive me for everything...*

Palpatine was so intent upon destroying Vader that he didn't sense Kenobi come to. Seeing what was happening, Obi-Wan gathered what was left of his own strength and rushed the emperor, hoping to blind side him. Palpatine saw him approach out of the corner of his eyes, but not quickly enough to prevent Kenobi from slicing through both of his wrists. Palpatine screamed in rage and pain as Vader slowly raised his weapon. With the last ounce of strength he had, he drove his red blade up and through the emperor's black heart, killing him instantly. Vader watched as Palpatine collapsed to the floor before he did so himself.

"Anakin, can you hear me?" Kenobi asked, rushing to Vader's side in an instant.

With tremendous effort Vader lifted a hand to Kenobi's shoulder. "Find her," he gasped. "Find Padmé..."

Kenobi nodded, hating to leave his once best friend dying this way. "I'll be back," he vowed, putting a hand on Vader's shoulder. "I promise you won't be left this time, Anakin."

Vader said nothing in response, for he was too weak from lack of oxygen. Kenobi stood up and quickly left through the secret corridor Vader had told him of on the way over, avoiding detection. He made his way through the complex unobserved, thanks to the Force and the emperor's own orders to keep the corridors clear. It wasn't long before he found the prisoner block. Dispatching the clones that stood guard, Kenobi found his way to Padmé's cell.

"Obi-Wan!" she cried, the relief spilling out of her as she ran to him. But her relief soon turned to terror when she realized that he was alone. "Where's Anakin?" she asked him. "Tell me he's all right!"

"I wish I could," Obi-Wan said, taking her gently by the shoulders. "Fighting the emperor took everything he had," he explained as they exited the room quickly. "His breathing apparatus has been damaged. I don't know what to do for him, Padmé."

Padmé's mind worked frantically, pushing aside the terror she felt and forcing her brain to think rationally. "Kamino," she said finally. "We have to get him to Kamino! They can help him, Obi-Wan."

Obi-Wan didn't know how, but reasoned she knew what she was talking about. He led her back to the offices of the emperor, shielding them both as they went. Padmé ran into the office ahead of him, screaming her husband's name when she saw him.

"Ani! Ani please speak to me!" she cried as she knelt at his side.

Vader turned his head to look at his wife, the visual receptors damaged and distorting her image. "Padmé," he said his voice barely audible. "You're safe!"

Padmé nodded as the tears spilled down her face. "Come on," she said. "We're taking you to Kamino."

Vader nodded and tried to stand.

"Help me get him to his feet," she said to Kenobi, taking charge at once.

Kenobi did as she directed, admiring her for the courage she showed despite the emotional turmoil he knew she was going through.

"This way," Kenobi said as Vader stood at last, an arm draped over each of them. Padmé staggered under his weight, and it took all her strength not to collapse under it. But Anakin needed her, and she wasn't about to let him down, not after all he'd risked coming after her, not after she'd finally found him again.

"Stay with us, Ani," she told him, "we're almost there."

The walk to the hangar bay seemed endless, each step sapping more strength from him until finally they reached it. Clone troopers moved to see what was going on, alarmed to see Lord Vader injured.

"Help us!" Padmé commanded, and the clones moved at once, recognizing the Lady Vader. The clones moved quickly and carried Vader into a nearby shuttle. "Put him into a medical capsule, quickly!" she told the clones, running along side them as they brought Vader on

board. As two moved to find the capsule, Padmé turned to Kenobi. “Hurry, Obi-Wan,” she said. “Hurry!”

Obi-Wan gave her a quick nod and ran to the shuttle’s cockpit. He took a moment to look over the controls, and was once again reminded how much he hated flying. But Padmé was counting on him, and he wasn’t about to let her down.

The clones were quick to find the capsule and placed Vader into it at once.

“Wait,” Padmé said as they were about to close it. “His breathing apparatus is seriously damaged. We should take his mask up and put the oxygen mask on him,” she decided.

The clones reasoned that she knew what she was talking about and stood back to let her proceed. With trembling hands Padmé removed Vader’s helmet and tossed it aside onto the deck. She looked up briefly as the shuttle lifted off, and then reached around behind Vader’s head to unclasp the mask. Pulling it off his face gently, she lowered the oxygen mask over his nose and mouth.

“Close the capsule,” she told the clones, her eyes never leaving Vader’s face. He was unconscious now, which made Padmé’s fears only worsen. *Hold on, Ani*, she thought fervently. *Don’t leave me...*

Once the shuttle had made the jump to hyperspace, Padmé activated the commscreen on the wall. Within moments Han Solo’s face appeared. He looked very relieved to see Padmé.

“Milady!” he said with a smile. “Thank the Maker you’re okay! The twins have been freaking out since you disappeared.”

“I’m fine, Han,” she said. “But my husband isn’t,” she added.

“Lord Vader’s hurt?? What’s wrong?”

“He was seriously injured,” she said, not going into the particulars with the clones nearby. ‘We’re taking him to Kamino for emergency surgery. I want you to meet us there,’ she said. “Bring the twins.”

Han nodded. “Of course, Milady,” he said. “I’ll wake them up right away.”

“Good,” she said.

“What should I tell them?” he asked before she ended the transmission.

“Tell them the truth,” she told him, knowing the twins would sense it if he lied. “They need to know the truth.”

“Okay,” he said, seeing in her eyes how frightened she was. “I’ll see you in a few hours.”

Padmé nodded, and then ended the transmission. Then she walked over and resumed her vigil beside her husband, counting the minutes until they reached Kamino.

The surgeons at Kamino were waiting when the shuttle landed, having been alerted ahead of time by Obi-Wan Kenobi. Vader had not regained consciousness, but the medical capsule had kept him alive during the voyage. Padmé ran out of the shuttle to keep up with the medical team that brought the medical capsule through the driving rain and into the facility.

"I'm sorry, you'll have to wait out here," one of the technicians told Padmé as they reached a set of double doors leading to the surgical wing.

Padmé stopped, and was about to protest when Obi-Wan joined her.

"Please keep Lord Vader's wife apprised of his condition at regular intervals," he said.

The technician looked at Padmé in surprise, not realizing that she was Vader's wife. "Of course, Lady Vader," he said. "We will keep you informed."

Padmé nodded her thanks, and then turned to Obi-Wan as the doors closed.

"He has to make it, Obi-Wan," she said as tears filled her eyes. "I can't lose him again, not now, not after we've found one another again."

Obi-Wan nodded, and set a hand on her shoulder. "I'm sure they will do everything they can," he said. "But tell me, why here, Padmé? Wouldn't the medical facilities on Coruscant have been easier?"

"The cloners here have perfected an organ regeneration procedure," she told him. "Anakin was here a few weeks ago to leave cell samples. They're creating new organs for him, Obi-Wan; only the procedure takes months. I don't know what they can do after such a short time."

Obi-Wan was surprised to hear of the amazing new medical breakthrough, and thought briefly of what it would mean to his one time friend if it were to be successful. "Well if there is help for Anakin anywhere in the galaxy, it's here," he assured her. "Now all we can do is wait for their assessment of his condition."

Padmé nodded. "I hate waiting," she sighed.

Obi-Wan smiled. "Yes, so do I," he told her. "Come, let's sit down. Standing here wringing our hands isn't going to make time go any faster."

Padmé allowed him to lead her to a nearby chair. She sat down; feeling exhausted both physically and emotionally. Obi-Wan watched her closely, worried about her well being.

"Are you all right?" he asked her.

Padmé hated to admit it, but in all the worry she'd almost forgotten that she was pregnant. "I'll be a lot better when I know Anakin is going to be okay," she told him.

Obi-Wan nodded. "Yes, you and me both," he replied quietly. 'He's changed, Padmé,' he went on to say. "I never would have dreamed it possible, but he truly has changed. I sense great conflict in him now. Having you and the twins in his life has caused that."

"He's coming back to us, Obi-Wan," Padmé averred. "Slowly but surely, Anakin Skywalker is getting stronger every day. Once he no longer needs the mask to live, it will make all the difference in him too."

Obi-Wan smiled in response, hoping with all his heart that she was right.

Chapter 58

Fifty-Eight

“Mom!!”

Padmé looked over and saw Luke, Leia and Han Solo approaching. She stood up at once and opened her arms to accept the twins’ tight hugs.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she said, holding them close.

“We were so worried,” Leia told her.

“Han wouldn’t tell us anything,” Luke added. “Where’s Dad? He’s hurt, isn’t he?”

Padmé nodded. “Yes, I’m afraid so,” she told them. ‘He was injured fighting the emperor.’ She looked up at Obi-Wan who was watching her exchange with the twins. “He would have died if Obi-Wan hadn’t been there,” she said.

The twins turned to him. “You’re Obi-Wan?” Leia asked.

Obi-Wan nodded. “Your father and I were once very close,” he told them. “I’ve known both your parents since they were children,” he added with a smile.

“You’re a Jedi, aren’t you?” Luke asked.

“Yes I am,” Obi-Wan replied.

“But I thought all the Jedi were killed in the purges,” Leia said.

“Well, not all of us were,” he told her.

“Thank you for helping our father,” Luke said. “Is the emperor dead?”

“Yes he is,” Obi-Wan assured him. “Your father killed him. His reign is over.”

“Why did the emperor take you, Mom?” Leia asked, turning back to Padmé. “I don’t get it.”

“The emperor wanted an apprentice to replace your father,” Padmé explained. “He had planned to take you two from your father until just recently when he learned that I’m carrying another child,” she told them.

Luke and Leia looked at one another in shock.

“You’re....you’re having a baby, Mom?” Leia asked in amazement.

Padmé nodded with a smile. “Yes I am,” she said.

“And the emperor planned to take your baby from you after he killed Dad,” Luke said.

“That’s exactly what he planned, Luke,” Obi-Wan put in. “But his plans have been foiled. He will never harm any of you now, including your new brother or sister.”

“Dad’s going to be okay, right?” Leia asked, the fear clearly showing in her eyes.

“We don’t know anything yet,” Padmé told her. “We’re still waiting for the doctors to let us know his condition.”

“Milady, there’s lots of talk back on the capital,” Han Solo said at this point. “The emperor’s death is all over the news, as well as Lord Vader’s disappearance. You’re going to need to do some damage control if you don’t want the real story to get out,” he said.

Padmé nodded, feeling overwhelmed by everything that was being thrown at her. “Arrange for a press conference, Han,” she told him. ‘We have to think of a story,’ she added, looking at Obi-Wan. “If the governors and moffs know the truth, they will seize control of the Empire.”

Obi-Wan nodded in agreement. “Might I suggest you make Anakin appear as the hero,” he suggested.

“He *is* the hero,” Leia said adamantly. “He killed that evil monster.”

“Yes, we know he is,” Padmé said. “But there are those in the Empire who won’t see it that way. I think Obi-Wan’s idea is a good one.”

“You could say Lord Vader was injured trying to protect the emperor,” Han suggested. “Maybe there was an assassination attempt or something.”

Padmé nodded. “Yes, that’s it,” she said. “That way Palpatine’s death will be explained and Anakin won’t be implicated.”

“Only thing is, there are security cameras that can show what really happened,” Han pointed out.

“Oh don’t worry about that,” Obi-Wan told him with a smile. “We took care of that before we even entered Palpatine’s office.”

“Then it will work,” Padmé said. “Han, make the arrangements. We need to get this story out there before things spiral out of control.”

“I’m right on it,” Han said, and trotted away to do his lady’s bidding.

“Lady Vader?”

Padmé turned to the doctor who had appeared in their midst. “How is he? How’s my husband?” she asked, feeling Luke and Leia each take one of her hands.

The doctor looked briefly at the twins before addressing Padmé once more. “Please, come and sit down,” he said gently.

Padmé felt cold terror fill her at his manner. “I don’t want to sit down,” she retorted. “Please tell me how he is!”

The doctor sighed, hating to be the one to tell her. “Lord Vader is on complete life support,” he told them at last. “I’m afraid he won’t survive, Milady. I wish his prognosis was more optimistic, but...”

“No!!” Padmé cried. “He *has* to survive! What about the cells? What about the organ regeneration?”

“Milady, it hasn’t even been a month since we started the regeneration process,” he told her. “The organs are no where near ready.”

Padmé’s mind worked frantically, and the way Luke and Leia were looking up at her only made things worse.

“Mom, Daddy’s not going to die, is he?” Leia asked, her eyes swimming with tears. “Tell me he isn’t going to die!”

“No, he is *not* going to die, Leia,” Padmé averred. She looked back at the doctor. ‘Can’t you do something to accelerate the growth process?’ she asked desperately. “There has to be something you can do! You can’t just give up and let him die!!”

The doctor looked at Padmé, and then at the two children at her sides, who were no doubt Lord Vader’s children. How could he not do everything possible to save the life of a man that meant so much to all of them?

“This goes against all normal procedures,” he said at last, “and I make no guarantees of success. But we will proceed if that is your wish, Milady.”

“It is,” Padmé replied at once. “Please Doctor, please do everything you can to save him.”

The physician nodded, and then turned and left them once more.

“He’ll be all right,” Padmé told her children as she hugged them to her. *He has to be...*

“How long is this surgery going to take?” Luke asked his mother.

“I don’t know, Luke,” Padmé replied. “But they will keep us posted, I’m sure,” she assured him.

Luke nodded, his mother’s words not reassuring him a lot.

“Come on,” she said, “let’s go sit down. We have a long wait ahead of us.”

Han had arranged for a press conference to take place first thing the next morning. While he was doing that, Obi-Wan had arranged for quarters for Padmé and her children, knowing that their stay on Kamino would no doubt be a long one.

“Goldenrod packed these for you before we left Coruscant,” Han said as he carried three bags into Padmé’s quarters.

“Goldenrod?” Padmé said.

“Yeah, you know, Threepio,” he said. “Drives me nuts most of the time, but sometimes he comes in handy.”

Padmé nodded. “Yes, on occasion,” she agreed. “Did Obi-Wan show you where you can stay?”

Han nodded. “Looks like I’m bunking with him,” he replied. “Guess it’s better than sleeping on a chair,” he quipped.

Padmé smiled, appreciating Han's efforts to lighten the mood. She looked over to where Luke and Leia had fallen asleep on the sofa. "Looks like someone's tired," she said.

"Yeah, well they were up early," he replied. "Come on, I'll help you get them to bed."

While Luke and Leia slept, Padmé spent the night pacing in the waiting room, despite both Han and Obi-Wan's efforts to get her to rest. Padmé could not rest, not while her husband's life was hanging in the balance. One of the attending nurses had been out at regular intervals to keep her abreast of what was happening. Each time she appeared Padmé grew tense, half expecting the nurse to tell her that Vader had died on the operating table. But so far he was holding on, and the surgeons were going ahead with the ground breaking procedure.

"Padmé I do wish you'd go and try to sleep," Obi-Wan said as he watched her pace restlessly.

"I can't," she told him. "I'm too nervous."

"You must keep in mind that you're in a delicate condition," he said tentatively. "And from my limited understanding, you need to get plenty of rest."

"I'll rest when I know that Anakin is going to be all right," she told him. She sat down across from him. "I have to think of what I'm going to say at this press conference," she told him.

"I'll be right at your side, Padmé," he told her. "If that is what you wish."

"Do you think that's wise?" she asked. "After all, you're a Jedi, an enemy of the Empire."

Obi-Wan nodded, stroking his beard thoughtfully. "Yes, you're right," he replied. "How do you plan on handling the issue of succession?" he asked.

"Well, the way I see it, Anakin should be the next ruler," she said. "But in the mean time, I will propose that the Senate assumes control of the Empire."

"That's a sensible solution," Obi-Wan replied. He hesitated before asking her another question. "Do you think that Anakin will want to be the emperor?"

Padmé didn't know how to respond. At one time she knew for certain that there was nothing more he wanted, when he asked her on Mustafar to rule the galaxy with him. Was that still what he wanted? Or had time and circumstances changed him?

"I don't honestly know," she told him at last. 'I've seen changes in him since we've been back together,' she explained, "and I know he's conflicted. But will that be enough to turn him against the idea of an Empire? I don't know, Obi-Wan," she told him tiredly. "I wish I did."

"Don't underestimate your influence on him, Padmé," he said. "He's changed just in the short time you've returned to his life. Perhaps all he needs is a bit of a nudge," he added with a smile.

"What is going on in that head of yours?" she asked, knowing him well enough to recognize the twinkle in his eye.

Obi-Wan smiled. "I just think that Anakin needs a mentor in his life," he explained. "And as it so happens, I have nothing better to do right now."

Padmé smiled. "Imagine that," she said. "I'm not sure he will like the idea of you appointing yourself his mentor, Obi-Wan," she admitted.

"I'm not seeking his approval," he stated. "The way I see it, he has no choice in the matter, particularly since I saved his life back there in Palpatine's office."

"You have a point there," she replied. Perhaps this is just what he needs, she reflected. Having Obi-Wan Kenobi back in his life was bound to have an influence on him, whether Vader liked it or not. 'I think it's a wonderful idea,' she said at last. "The job is yours. And between the two of us, we're bound to bring him back, don't you think?"

Obi-Wan sighed. "I truly hope so, Padmé," he told her. "I've missed Anakin all these years."

Padmé nodded, her throat tightening slightly. "So have I," she said quietly.

"Mom, Mom!"

Padmé and Obi-Wan looked over to see Luke come running into the room.

"What is it, Luke? What's wrong?" Padmé asked as Luke came to sit beside her.

"I had a bad dream," he told his mother as he sat beside her.

Padmé put her arm around him. "I'm sorry to hear it," she said, kissing the top of his head. "Do you want to tell me about it?" she asked.

Luke rubbed his eyes tiredly. "No," he said. "I don't want to think about it."

Padmé looked up at Obi-Wan, both of them hoping the same thing; that Luke's dream was not a portent of things to come.

"It's just because you're worried about your dad," Padmé told her son, stroking his hair gently. "It's natural that you'd have nightmares."

Luke nodded. "He's gonna be okay, right?" he asked.

Padmé didn't know how to answer the boy. As much as she wanted to reassure her son, she didn't want to give him false hope either. "They're doing everything they can, Luke," she said finally.

Luke nestled against his mother, not wanting to cry, but feeling miserable all the same. He took comfort in her warm embrace and soothing presence, and soon he drifted off to sleep again.

Padmé rested her head on top of Luke's, wants to comfort the boy as much as possible. She was exhausted, and soon found her eyelids growing heavy. She'd fought to stay awake for so long, but was losing the battle. Soon she too drifted off, her son nestled up against her.

Han Solo returned to the waiting area at this moment and smiled when he saw Padmé asleep.

"She finally gave up, eh?" he asked Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan nodded. “Yes, it’s about time,” he said.

“Yeah it sure is,” Han agreed. “Why don’t you go get some shut eye?” he suggested.

“Did you sleep at all?” Obi-Wan asked as he stood up and stretched.

“Yeah, a little,” Han replied, sitting down and looking at Padmé. “She’s an amazing lady, isn’t she?” he asked.

Obi-Wan nodded. “She always has been,” he replied. “I met her when she was a queen at the tender age of fourteen.”

Han smiled. “Now, why doesn’t that surprise me?” he asked.

Obi-Wan smiled. “Wake me if there’s any word,” he told Han.

“Will do,” Han replied, and watched Obi-Wan as he walked away before assuming his leg of the long vigil.

Chapter 59

Fifty-nine

Padmé woke up as Han shook her shoulder gently. She opened her eyes and looked up at him.

"I'm sorry to wake you, Milady," he told her. "But the doctor is here and wants to talk to you."

Padmé was awake at once and sat up, smoothing down her hair as she looked over at the doctor who sat waiting for her. "The surgery is complete?" she asked

"Yes Milady," the doctor replied. "Lord Vader is stable," he informed her.

"Thank the Maker," she sighed.

"I have to say that I was quite appalled at the state his injuries had been left in," he told her. "We removed the prosthetics of course, but the manner in which they were attached was, quite simply, barbaric."

Padmé frowned. "What do you mean?"

"They were drilled into the bone," the doctor said. "I can only hope they used an anesthetic, for the pain would have been excruciating. Even afterwards..."

Obi-Wan could see how upset this line of discussion was making Padmé, and decided to interrupt before it got worse. "And now what?" he said. "Now that the surgery is complete, what's next?"

The surgeon looked at Obi-Wan. "Now that the operation is over, we have placed him in full stasis," the physician explained. "He is currently submerged in a Bacta-Tank where the regeneration process will continue."

"How long will he need to be in there?" Padmé asked.

"This is a ground breaking procedure, Milady," he explained. "So we really have no idea how long it will take for the organs to regenerate completely. However, we will be monitoring him constantly," he assured her. "It won't take us long to establish a time line once we see the rate of regeneration."

Padmé nodded her understanding. "So it has begun? The regeneration process?" she asked.

"Yes it has," the doctor replied. "So far he is responding well."

"Can I see him?" Padmé asked. "I know he's in the bacta tank, but is there any way I can be close to him?"

"You can observe him from a distance, but I'm afraid that's all presently," he told her. "Of course, once he's out of the bacta you'll be able to see him."

"I understand," she said. "May I see him now?"

“Yes of course,” he said. “Come with me.”

Padmé stood up and looked back at Luke, who was still asleep. “Stay with him,” she told Obi-Wan, who nodded in response. She then walked away with the doctor, bracing herself for what she would see.

The surgeon led Padmé through the blast doors and down the corridor through the surgical wing to the intensive care unit. She felt the knots inside of her tightening as they approached a large bacta tank on the far side of the ICU, her apprehension and tension growing with each step.

“He’s stable,” the doctor said as they stopped at the tank. “As you can see we have medidroids monitoring his vital signs constantly, as well as his body mass on regular intervals.”

Padmé nodded, only half listening, for she was looking at her husband as he floated in the bacta. He had bandages at the ends of his truncated limbs, where the prosthetics had once been, as well as on his chest and face. A breathing mask was fitted over his face, and the top of his head was bandaged as well. It was nearly impossible to see him, but Padmé couldn’t take her eyes away. *My poor Anakin*, she thought, the words of the surgeon coming back to mind. *How you must have suffered...*

“He’s not in any pain, is he?” she asked.

“No, he’s in stasis, Milady,” the surgeon assured her. “He isn’t feeling anything right now. It’s like he’s in a very deep sleep.”

“I see,” she replied, her eyes never leaving Vader. She was starting to wonder how Luke and Leia would react to seeing their father this way, when her comlink sounded.

“Milady, it’s Solo.”

“Go ahead, Han,” she replied.

“I hate to interrupt, but the media is here,” he told her. “It’s nearly 900 hours.”

“Very well,” she said, hating to leave her husband so soon. “I’m going to go get cleaned up. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“I’ll let them know,” he told her. “Solo out.”

Padmé took one last look at her husband and then left the ICU, her tension level escalating as she prepared for the upcoming press conference.

Han was already in the small media room when Padmé arrived a short time later. At once all the reporters took their seats, all of them eager to find out what the wife of Darth Vader had to say.

“Good morning,” she said as they quieted down. ‘And thank you for coming. I wanted to have this press conference in order to set the record straight about what transpired in the Imperial palace yesterday.’ Padmé took a deep breath before continuing. “There was an assassination attempt upon Emperor Palpatine,” she began. “His private offices were breached by two renegade Jedi. My husband, Lord Darth Vader, happened to arrive as the battle between them was winding down, and fought to save the emperor. However, Palpatine

was killed in the attack and my husband was badly injured. He is now in stasis, having undergone extensive surgery that saved his life.”

There was a murmur of discussion around the room at this, and Padmé glanced over at Han who stood off to the side.

“The Empire needs leadership,” she continued after a few moments. “And in the absence of my husband, who is the natural choice for successor, I am appointing the Senate to take control of the Empire.”

The media was surprised by this, and at once they started shouting out questions.

“Hey, hold on,” Han said, stepping forward. “One at a time,” he told them sternly. Once they had come under control, Padmé started to field questions.

“Lady Vader, what has become of the two assassins?”

“They are dead,” Padmé replied simply. “Killed by my husband.”

“Lady Vader, was there a will that named Lord Vader as the late emperor’s successor?”

“I’m not sure there is a will, but it stands to reason that he would be,” Padmé replied. “He’d been his right hand for ten years.”

“Lady Vader, you were once involved with the Delegation of 2000. Are you involved in the Rebel alliance? And if so, is this your way of sabotaging the Empire?”

Padmé frowned. “I will not even dignify that question with an answer,” she said, growing angry. “Are there any other more intelligent questions out there?” she asked tersely.

“Lady Vader, where have you been for the past ten years?” one man asked. “And why did you leave your children to be raised by strangers?”

“That has nothing whatever to do with this press conference,” Han spoke up angrily. “And you damn well know it! One more personal question and I’ll end this right here and now!”

“Lady Vader, how long will Lord Vader be incapacitated?”

“The doctors can’t say for sure,” Padmé replied. “Hopefully not long, but it’s impossible to say at this point.”

“If he dies, will you assume leadership of the Empire?”

Padmé looked at Han, and shook her head, and then walked away from the podium as holocameras flashed madly. Han, with the help of a few clone troopers, ushered the reporters out of the room, ending the press conference abruptly.

“I’m sorry about that, Milady,” Han said. “I should have briefed them better before you began.”

Padmé shook her head. “No, it’s not your fault,” she replied, running a hand over her brow. “This was a mistake. I never should have called it so soon, it’s too much.”

“No, you did the right thing,” Han said. “Otherwise the rumors would have got out of hand, and you’d have a civil uprising on your hands.”

Padmé only half heard what Han was saying, for she was experiencing pain in the lower part of her abdomen, and it was getting worse.

"Milady? Are you okay?" Han asked, seeing that she was in distress.

Padmé looked up at him and shook her head. "I think you'd better get me to a doctor, Han," she said. She winced as another pang ripped through her. "Quickly," she added quietly.

Han grew alarmed, but did his best to remain calm. He put an arm around Padmé and attempted to escort her out of the room, but she doubled over as another spasm of pain hit her.

"What's happening?" she cried. And then she knew... *my baby*... "Han, help me!"

Han didn't wait another second and picked her up into his arms and ran out of the room towards the medical center, not caring about the strange looks he earned along the way. Once there he quickly told a nurse what had happened, and a medidroid appeared with a gurney. Han lay Padmé down on the gurney gently, hating to see her in so much pain. The nurse wheeled her away, leaving Han alone again. *Let her be okay*, he thought grimly. *This family has been through enough already.*

Han hadn't been waiting long when Luke and Leia appeared, both of them wearing an expression of concern.

"Where's our mother?" Leia demanded.

Han looked at her, and then at Luke, wondering how to soften the blow. "Well, she's... she's not feeling well," he told them. "She's in with the doctor right now."

The twins frowned, sensing that there was more to it than Han was saying.

"What's wrong?" Luke asked. "We know something is."

Han sighed. "I don't know for sure kid," he said. "All I know is she was in a lot of pain. The doctor will be able to tell us more when he finished checking her out."

Luke and Leia weren't comforted by his words, and their sense of misgiving only grew.

As it turned out, their misgivings were well founded. After taking a blood sample, the doctors confirmed what Padmé had feared all along: miscarriage.

"I'm sorry, Milady," the nurse told her gently. "There's nothing we can do for you. I'm afraid your baby is lost."

Padmé felt the hot tears slide out of her eyes as she digested this dire news. Even though she'd only known a very short time that she was pregnant, she'd grown excited at the prospect of becoming a mother again. And now that was over, her tiny baby, mere days old, was gone.

"I'd like you to remain here for the balance of the day," the doctor told her. "You would benefit from some rest."

Padmé merely nodded, the lump in her throat preventing her from speaking. She closed her eyes as the sorrow washed over her, and mourned quietly for the loss of her child.

"Are you Lady Vader's children?"

Luke and Leia looked up at the physician who had emerged from the examination room.

“Yes we are,” Leia said as they both stood up with Han. “Do you have news about our mother? Is she okay?”

“She’ll be fine,” he reassured her. “However, I’m afraid she’s suffered a miscarriage. It was spontaneous, and there was nothing we could have done to prevent it. I’m sorry.”

“What does that mean?” Luke asked in frustration. ‘What has happened?’
“It means your mother’s baby has died,” the doctor explained gently. “I’m very sorry.”

Luke and Leia were stunned by the news, for neither had enough life experience to even know something like that could happen. They looked at one another, both of them having the same thought.

“Can we see her?” Leia asked.

The doctor nodded. “Yes, I think she could use your company right now,” he said. “Go on in.”

Luke and Leia didn’t hesitate for a moment and went into the room to offer their mother what comfort they could in her hour of need.

Chapter 60

Sixty

Sixty

Coruscant

Padmé's press conference had been seen widely throughout the capital, and the announcement that the Senate was to be in charge of running the Empire until Vader recovered came as a shock to most. Senator Mon Mothma of Chandrila, like many others, received the information with mixed emotions.

Mothma had been a good friend of Padmé Amidala's before the Empire's inception, and was having difficulty accepting Padmé as the wife of Darth Vader. Her seeming acceptance of Vader and his atrocities begged the question: whose side was Padmé on, anyway. Mothma had always known Padmé to be a strong supporter of democracy, and no one was more devastated than she was when Palpatine had seized control and created the dictatorship he'd called an Empire. *So why is she going by the name of Lady Vader? What is going on with you, Padmé?*

"Senator Mothma, we're ready to leave."

Mothma looked up from her musings. "Very well," she said. "Be careful."

One of the men nodded. "We will be," he assured her. "No need to worry, Senator."

Mothma did worry, though. This was a delicate time for the galaxy. The death of Palpatine had created shock waves throughout the Empire. The fact that Darth Vader was incapacitated had left the way open for the Senate to start to make the changes the Imperial bureaucracy had made impossible. But now... Padmé had made it possible as she had put the Senate in charge. *Do you know what you've started, Padmé?* She wondered. *Was this your plan all along?*

Kamino

Padmé woke up from a deep sleep; one that had been augmented with a sedative that the nurse had insisted she take. Luke and Leia had stayed with her for a long time until she'd gone to sleep.

After a shower, Padmé sat down at the communication screen and keyed in the code for Naboo. There was one person in the galaxy who she could talk to about how she felt, one person who already understood the complexities of her life.

"Padmé, I'm so glad to hear from you!" Sola said as she saw her sister's face. "What's going on?? What happened to Vader?"

"He was seriously injured," Padmé replied, careful not to say too much lest her communication was being monitored. "But he's going to be okay."

Sola nodded, knowing her sister well enough to know there was a lot more to it than she was saying. "Are you okay?"

Padmé didn't even try to hide how she felt. Shaking her head, her eyes filled with tears. "No," she whispered. 'So much has happened, Sola,' she said. "I don't even know where to start!"

Sola didn't need to hear any more. "I'm coming to Kamino," she said. "I don't know why you're even there, but I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Thanks Sola," Padmé said, smiling through her tears. "I love you."

Sola smiled back, greatly worried by her sister's fragile state. "I love you too," she replied. "I'll see you soon."

Padmé closed the transmission and stood up as a nurse entered the room carrying a breakfast tray.

"Good morning, Milady," the nurse said. "How are you feeling?" Padmé wasn't sure how to respond. Physically she felt fine; there was no more pain, and she was well rested for the first time in days. But emotionally...

"I'm fine," she said. "Can I leave soon?" she asked.

"I'm sure the physician will want to examine you first, Milady," the nurse replied. "Why don't you have something to eat?" she suggested.

Padmé sighed as she sat down on the edge of her bed and looked at the food on the table before her. "I want to see my husband," she said quietly. "My children need me."

The nurse nodded. "I understand," she replied.

Padmé looked up at her. *You do? Somehow I doubt that.*

"Why don't I go and see if I can find the doctor?" the nurse suggested.

"Good idea," Padmé replied.

As Padmé sat down and picked up her cup of tea the door chime sounded. "Come in," she called. At once the door opened to reveal Han Solo and Obi-Wan Kenobi.

"May we come in?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Yes of course," Padmé said.

The two men entered the room, both appearing a little unsure of themselves.

"How are you feeling?" Han asked a little awkwardly.

"I'm okay," Padmé replied, not allowing herself to dwell further on the question. "Where are the twins?"

"They're asleep," Obi-Wan replied.

"Don't worry about them, Milady," Han assured her. "I've got them covered."

Padmé smiled. "I'm sure you do," she said. "I'm concerned about them missing so much school."

"They're bright kids," Han replied. "They'll catch up."

Padmé nodded. "Yes," she replied. "But I wonder if we can do something more."

"What about distance education?" Obi-Wan suggested. "Surely a facility such as Veslack would be equipped for remote learning."

"Yes, that's a good idea," Padmé said. "Han could you inquire about that? About a net cast that the twins could access here?"

"Sure thing," Han replied. "I'll get right on that."

"Thank you," Padmé replied.

A few moments of awkward silence ensued, when neither of the men knew what to say. Finally Obi-Wan spoke.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am about your loss, Padmé," he said.

Padmé lowered her eyes, not wanting to lose control of her emotions. "Thank you," she said quietly. "I'm grateful at least that Anakin won't have to suffer it too."

"What do you mean, Milady?" Han asked.

"He didn't know that I was pregnant," Padmé explained. "I only found out when Palpatine told me. He found out from the blood samples that we gave him."

"Anakin knew, Padmé," Obi-Wan told her. "When he came to me to ask for my help he told me."

Padmé frowned. "But how could he have known?" she asked. "I didn't even know."

"Lord Vader has a way of knowing stuff before other people do," Han commented. "I've noticed that about him."

Obi-Wan smiled at Han's comment. "Yes, he is very insightful. Perhaps he sensed it through the Force," he suggested.

"I suppose so," Padmé replied. "But that means I have to tell him about...that the baby is gone," she said quietly.

"It will be hard for him to hear, no doubt," Obi-Wan replied. "But you will have one another to support."

Padmé sighed. "But it could be weeks before his recovery is complete," she replied.

"Perhaps not," Obi-Wan replied. "Anakin has always recovered quickly. I always thought it was the high count of medichlorians in his blood."

"Let's hope you're right," Padmé replied. "I need him," she added quietly.

Obi-Wan and Han looked at one another, neither of them knowing what to say at this point. Luckily for them they were spared the task of thinking of how to respond by the timely entrance of the attending physician.

“Good morning, Lady Vader,” he said. “I hope you had a good rest.”

“I did, thank you,” she replied.

“Would you excuse us, gentlemen?” he asked, looking at Obi-Wan and Han.

“Of course,” Obi-Wan said. “I’ll go check on the twins,” he told Padmé.

“I’ll go contact the school,” Han told her.

“Thank you both,” Padmé said.

The two men left, allowing the physician to examine his patient.

Coruscant— central detention center

Bail Organa pushed around what was supposed to be his breakfast on his plate. It was cold now, though it had never been very hot to begin with he realized peevishly. Shoving the plate aside, Bail stood up and paced around in the small cell. He had been incarcerated for close to a week now, and was beginning to think that he’d never see the light of day again. *At least Vader hasn’t been back*, he reflected. And as much as he was relieved that he’d been spared the Dark Lord’s presence, he was confused by Vader’s absence. What could have happened to postpone the inevitable? Had someone else giving Vader the information he sought? Was Vader simply delaying his return as a means of psychological torment? *Anything’s possible with him*, he realized grimly. *He’s the master of torture...*

Organa looked over to the door as he heard the sound of the force field being deactivated. Every muscle in his body tightened as he waited for the dreaded and menacing figure of Darth Vader to enter the room. But it was not Vader who entered the cell; rather it was two men Organa recognized.

“Senator Organa are you all right?” the first man asked.

Organa nodded, noting that both men were armed with blasters. “What is this, a jail break?”

The second man smiled. “There’s no need for that, sir,” he assured Bail. “I promise you we are completely authorized to do this.”

“By whom?” Organa asked in confusion. ‘Don’t get me wrong, I’m thrilled to leave this place,’ he told them as they walked out of the cell. “But I’m at a loss to understand how it’s possible,” he added, looking over his shoulder at the clone troopers who simply stood and watched them leave.

“The Imperial Senate ordered your release, Viceroy,” one man told him.

Organa frowned. “The Senate?? But what about the emperor? What about Vader?”

“The emperor is dead, sir,” one man informed him. “And Vader was seriously injured trying to protect him. He’s recovering on Kamino right now, and not even his wife knows how long he’ll be incapacitated. It was her who put the Senate in charge of things.”

Organa smiled. “Well, I’ll have to thank her when I get the chance,” he said. His mind was racing with the implications of what he had just learned. Palpatine was dead, and Vader out of

action. *And the Senate is in charge of the Empire...* “Take me to Senator Mothma,” he told his two companions.

“That’s exactly where we’re headed,” one man told him. “It was she who sent us.”

Organa nodded, not at all surprised to hear this. “We have a lot to discuss,” he said with a smile.

Kamino

“So I can leave?” Padmé asked.

“Yes,” the doctor replied. “Just be sure to take it easy and get plenty of rest. And if you have any problems, come back and see me.”

Padmé nodded. “One more question,” she said. “Will I be able to have more children?” she asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

The doctor smiled. “Of course,” he assured her.

Padmé sighed with relief. “Thank you, Doctor,” she said.

“Not at all,” he replied. “I’ll let you get dressed now. I’m sure you’re anxious to get to your children.”

“Yes I am,” she replied. “Thanks again.”

“Good morning, Leia,” Obi-Wan said as Leia emerged from her room.

“Morning,” she said sleepily. “Where’s my mom? Is she back yet?”

“Not yet,” Obi-Wan told her. “But I’m sure it will be very soon, probably today.”

Leia nodded as she walked over to the food replicator with a yawn. “I hope she’s okay,” she said.

“Your mother is a very strong person,” Obi-Wan told her. “One of the strongest I’ve ever known. She’ll get through this, Leia. Have no fear.”

Leia sat down at the table with her breakfast just as Luke stumbled into the room, hair all askew from sleep.

“Morning,” he said through a big yawn. “Is Mom back yet?”

“Not yet, Luke,” Obi-Wan told him. “Have some breakfast. She’ll be back soon, I’m sure.”

After replicating himself something to eat, Luke joined his twin at the table. “I wish they’d let us see Dad,” he said.

Obi-Wan nodded. “I’m sure they will,” he assured Luke. “Have you ever seen your father’s face?” he asked them.

“Only in a holovid,” Leia told him. “He never let us see him without his mask,” she added.

“What happened to him, Obi-Wan?” Luke asked. “You knew him when he was Anakin Skywalker. How did he become Darth Vader?”

Obi-Wan said nothing for a moment, for he didn't know what to tell the boy. What was more, he wasn't certain he had the right to tell him anything. "Your father had a terrible accident," he told him. "On the planet Mustafar."

"We know that much," Leia told him. "How did it happen?"

Obi-Wan sighed, and ran a hand over his beard. "I'm not sure you want to hear this, younglings," he said quietly. "It's not an easy story to hear, or to tell for that matter."

"But we want to know," Luke insisted. "He's our father. We have a right to know."

Obi-Wan hesitated, trying to decide what to do. But Luke was right; he did have a right to know. And aside from Vader himself, Obi-Wan was the only person who really knew what happened on that fateful day on Mustafar. "Very well," he said. "I will tell you."

Padmé left her room, only too happy to do so, and headed for the ICU. Her mind told her not to expect any changes in her husband's condition since she'd last seen him, but her heart couldn't help but be hopeful. The thought of him being whole again, of never having to rely on artificial means for his very survival filled her with excitement. It was her hope that the physical changes in him would lead to other changes as well. He had already begun to change, of that she was certain. Now that Palpatine was dead, Vader would no longer be in constant servitude to him. He would be free now to be who he wanted, to do what he wanted. The question was, did he want to be Anakin Skywalker again more than merely in physical form?

"Good morning Lady Vader," one of the ICU nurses said in greeting.

"Good morning," Padmé replied. "I'm here to see my husband," she told her.

The nurse nodded in understanding. "His condition hasn't changed," she informed Padmé as they walked to the bacta tank. "He's still stable, still in stasis."

Padmé wasn't surprised by this, for it had only been a few days. She looked at him, noting that he was now in a foetal position. *I miss you*, she thought, leaning her forehead against the glass, trying to discern if there was any change in the way he looked.

"Has there been any change in his body mass?" she asked one of the attending droids.

"We have noted a 12 increase in Lord Vader's body mass since the surgery," one droid informed her.

Padmé was surprised. "Really? Twelve percent?"

"It seems Lord Vader has an unusual element in his blood that has enabled the DNA coding process to be accelerated," the droid told her.

"Does that mean he will be whole again sooner than the doctors had anticipated?" she asked hopefully.

"It seems likely to be the case," the droid replied. "However, it is too early to say for sure."

Padmé nodded, trying not to get her hopes up, but having difficulty not doing so. She looked one more time at Vader before leaving the ICU, anxious to share her news with Luke and Leia.

Chapter 61

Sixty-one

“Palpatine had always taken a great interest in your father,” Obi-Wan began. “In hindsight, it’s easy to see why. You see younglings, none of us knew that Palpatine was in fact a Sith Lord, not until he was poised to destroy the Republic and the Jedi Order. He used your father to help him do both.”

Neither Luke nor Leia had ever understood why their father had turned to the Dark Side, for neither of them had felt it appropriate to ask him. To learn now that Palpatine had used him made sense to them, for they knew well how evil and manipulative the late emperor had been.

“Once it was discovered that Palpatine was actually Darth Sidious, the Sith Lord that we’d been looking for for more than ten years, it was too late for the Jedi to stop him,” Obi-Wan continued. “Your father swore his loyalty to him, and together they destroyed the Jedi. The only two Jedi left were myself and Yoda, and it was up to us to stop the Sith if we could. Yoda confronted Sidious, while I was the one to confront your father. The only trouble was, I didn’t know where he was. But I knew that there was one person who would know, and that was Padmé. I went to see her, not knowing that they were married. They’d been close for years, but no one suspected how serious their relationship had become. When I arrived at your mother’s apartment, it was clear that she was very pregnant, and that was when it all started to make sense. I told her what Anakin had done, about the Jedi slayings, how he’d turned to the Dark Side, but she refused to believe me. She loved your father so much it seemed that she couldn’t imagine him doing anything so heinous. I left her, knowing that she would go to him, and I was right. She left within an hour of me leaving her. When I saw her board her ship, I snuck on board, knowing that she would take me to Anakin. And she did.”

Leia frowned. “You tricked our mother?” she asked angrily. “You used her without her even knowing it?”

“Yes he did.”

All three turned to the doorway where Padmé stood. The twins stood up to greet her as Obi-Wan wondered how much she had heard.

“The twins wanted to know how it was that their father came to need the mask,” Obi-Wan explained. “I was attempting to explain it to them.”

“Yes, so I hear,” Padmé said, walking in with the twins and taking a seat. “I’m not sure they’re ready to hear what happened on Mustafar, Obi-Wan,” she said with a slight frown.

“Yes we are,” Luke insisted. “Our past was so full of lies and hidden truths that we need to know the truth now,” he said. “No matter how much it hurts to hear it,” he added, looking at his sister, who nodded in agreement.

Padmé looked at Obi-Wan doubtfully, and then sighed. “Very well,” she said. ‘But don’t say I didn’t warn you,’ she added. “As Obi-Wan told you, I went to Mustafar to find your father. I refused to believe the horrible things I’d been told about him, and wanted to hear him deny doing them. But when I got there, he didn’t deny any of it. He had changed so much, I barely knew who he was. He wanted me to help him destroy the emperor and rule the galaxy together, claiming that everything he had done he’d done to protect me.”

“To protect you?” Leia asked. “How could destroying the Jedi possibly protect you?”

“You see, the day I told you father I was expecting the two of you, he began to have dreams, nightmares about me dying in childbirth,” Padmé explained. “He had foreseen the death of his mother years earlier in a series of dreams spanning over many weeks; so when he began to dream of me dying, he became terrified that they’d come true. He grew obsessed with finding a way to prevent me from dying as he was sure I would, and, I suppose, in his desperation he turned to the one person who would take advantage of his fears: Palpatine.”

“You mean Anakin turned to the Dark Side to save you from dying?” Obi-Wan asked incredulously.

“I believe that’s how it began,” Padmé told him. “But the power changed him to the point where I couldn’t even bring him back. I begged him to abandon it, to come with me to raise our family but he wouldn’t listen. And then Obi-Wan appeared.” Padmé frowned as she recalled that horrible moment, the moment that she’d relived in nightmares for ten years. She looked at her twins as they waited expectantly for her to continue. Luke and Leia adored their father; how could she tell them what he’d done to her without damaging that love? Would they be able to forgive him as she had?

“When your father saw Obi-Wan, he grew furious,” Padmé continued. “He thought I’d brought him there to kill him, that I’d betrayed him. I had no idea that Obi-Wan had been on board my ship, but your father wouldn’t listen, and he... he reached out with the Force and... choked me.”

Luke and Leia were utterly stunned and horrified to hear this, and wanted desperately not to believe her. But they did; they both knew their mother would never lie, especially about such a thing, and they could both feel that she was telling them the truth.

“Oh, Mom,” Leia said softly as tears filled her eyes. “No!”

Padmé nodded as her own eyes teared up. “I’m afraid so,” she said softly. “I know now that it was a moment of madness, brought on by a night spent killing, by fear and anger and desperation; but it happened. Your father has hated himself for it every day since then, and has begged me to forgive him for what he did.”

“Have you forgiven him?” Luke asked solemnly. “I don’t know how you can, Mom. That’s horrible; beyond horrible!”

“I have forgiven him, Luke,” Padmé replied. “Just as the two of you must forgive him as well,” she added, looking at Leia.

The twins exchanged a look as Obi-Wan watched in amazement.

“What happened next?” Luke asked, looking at Obi-Wan. “Is that when you fought?”

Obi-Wan nodded. "I confronted your father right then and there," he told them twins. "And it became clear to me that he wasn't the same man I'd called my brother for ten years. He was full of darkness and anger, and I knew that I had to destroy him or there would be dire consequences for the galaxy. And so we fought. It was a bloody, vicious fight, surrounded by the rivers of molten lava and stench of sulphur. Your father was mad with power, and there were many times when I thought I would die. But in the end, it wasn't to be. Your father was arrogant, and certain of victory, and made a foolish error. I...took advantage of it."

"What did you do to him?" Leia asked him bluntly.

Obi-Wan had relived that dreadful moment many times over the past ten years, but he had never spoken to anyone about it, had never had to describe in words what he had done to his one time best friend. But now, with Anakin's ten year old children watching him expectantly, he would have no choice but to do so.

"I sliced through his legs and arms as he leapt over me," Obi-Wan told them. "Cutting them below the knees and the elbows. He fell onto the edge of a river of lava, and within moments his clothes ignited, and he was engulfed in flames."

Padmé didn't know the particulars of what had happened until now, and she found herself trembling with emotion as she listened. The twins were crying openly by this point.

"Palpatine brought him to a medical facility," Obi-Wan continued quietly, "where he was fitted with the prosthetics and mask he needed to live. I don't imagine Palpatine went to great lengths to try to repair your father's injuries, and preferred to leave him in pain and dependent on artificial means to survive."

"Why didn't you help him?" Luke asked. "You could have taken him somewhere to help him!"

Obi-Wan had no answer for this. "I... I don't know what to tell you, Luke," he said.

"You left him to die, didn't you?" Leia asked as tears streamed down her face. "You walked away from him when he was in so much pain! How could you??"

Obi-Wan lowered his eyes, having no answer for the child.

"I really can't say for sure," he said finally. "Perhaps it was cowardice, perhaps I simply couldn't bring myself to kill him outright. I really have no excuse, younglings. I know that must make me seem monstrous in your eyes."

The four were silent for a few moments, the twins not about to deny his statement.

"What you did *was* monstrous," Padmé said at last. "Leaving a man to burn to death... 'she stopped, stemming the tide of emotions that threatened to spill out of her.' But you have atoned for that, Obi-Wan," she reminded him. "You saved his life. You helped him destroy that monster, Palpatine."

Obi-Wan nodded. "Yes, true," he replied, grateful for her compassion. "I don't know that Anakin will feel that way, though."

"I think he will," Padmé assured him. "And it won't be long before he can tell you so himself."

The twins brightened up hearing this.

"You mean the regeneration is working?" Leia asked.

Padmé nodded, a smile forming on her face. "The medidroid told me that there has been a twelve percent increase in his body mass since the surgery."

"That's a lot for just a few days," Luke remarked happily.

"Yes it is," Padmé agreed.

"I told you the medichlorians would make a difference," Obi-Wan told her.

Padmé nodded, hoping that Anakin's progress would continue at the same rate it had begun.

"Good news, kids," Han announced as he entered the suite. "You're all set up for school."

Luke and Leia looked at one another, then back at Han. "School??" they said in unison.

"Yeah, school," Han replied. "You know, teacher, learning stuff, all that jazz," he added with a grin.

"We know what school is," Leia replied tersely. "How do you expect us to go to school when we're here?"

"An ingenious invention known as the holonet," Han told her. "Veslack is outfitted to transmit your classes directly here to you," he continued. "This way you won't miss a thing. Isn't that cool?"

"Yeah, really cool," Luke grumbled.

"Thanks Han," Leia added her displeasure evident in her voice.

Han, who thought he'd be hailed as a hero, looked at Padmé with a *what did I do wrong?* expression on his face. Padmé merely smiled.

Coruscant

Mon Mothma smiled when she saw Bail Organa enter her office.

"Hello Bail," she said. "I trust you're well."

"Aside from needing a shower and a change of clothes, I'm fine," he told her. "Thanks for getting me out of there."

"Don't thank me," Mothma replied. "If it hadn't been for Padmé, I wouldn't have been able to do so."

"Yes, so I understand," Bail replied, sitting down. "Seems a lot happened during my incarceration."

Mothma nodded. "It's been an incredible few days, Bail," she told him. "I don't know all the details about Palpatine's assassination, but it has certainly created a chain reaction of events."

"Who were the assassins?" Organa asked. "Have their identities been revealed?"

“No, nothing is known,” Mothma replied. “And I have to say it’s very peculiar,” she added thoughtfully.

“What do you mean?” Organa asked.

“Well, Padmé held a press conference,” Mothma told him. “She is currently on Kamino, where apparently Vader has undergone some miraculous new procedure to repair his injuries,” she explained.

“Interesting,” Organa commented, not wanting to consider what a repaired, strong Darth Vader would mean.

“She was asked about the assassins,” Mothma continued. “And all she said was that there had been two of them and that Vader had killed them both.”

Organa frowned. “Something is strange about this,” he said. “How would anyone get close enough to Palpatine to kill him?”

Mothma shrugged. “It’s all very mysterious, isn’t it?” she said. “I have half a mind to take a trip to Kamino to speak to Padmé myself.”

“That may not be such a bad idea,” Organa said. ‘We need to know where we stand with her,’ he continued. “And after the last time I saw her, I’m not the one to ask her.”

Mothma nodded in agreement, remembering what he had told her about the incident at the emperor’s party.

“But you and Padmé have always been close,” Organa continued. “If you can rekindle that friendship, just imagining the possibilities.”

“You’re forgetting something, Bail,” she pointed out. “Padmé is married to Darth Vader.”

“And Darth Vader is out of commission indefinitely,” Organa reminded her.

Mothma frowned. “What are you suggesting, Bail?” she asked.

“Only that we take advantage of the opportunity before us,” he replied.

“I don’t need to remind you about the Death Star, do I?” he asked her.

Mothma shook her head. The Rebel Alliance had been chasing rumours for years about an enormous space station, a mighty arsenal capable of destruction on an unimaginable scale. Unfortunately the Empire had managed to keep the location of this space station as well guarded as the Rebel had the location of their base.

“What makes you think Padmé would know anything about it?” she asked. “Vader is many things but he isn’t stupid. He would never leak a military secret of that magnitude, even to his wife.”

“Perhaps not,” Organa admitted. “But it’s worth a shot, isn’t it? If Padmé knew that the Empire had created such a weapon of mass destruction, she’d be the first one to search for a way to destroy it.”

“That was true of her once,” Mothma agreed. “But now? She’s not the same woman, Bail. She’s a mother who has been through hell for the past ten years. That changes everything. We

don't know the dynamics of her relationship with Vader. What if she is only with him to be close to her children? Do you really think that she'd jeopardize that after all she's been through?"

Organa couldn't reply to her question, for he couldn't say that for sure. "We have to let her make that decision, Mothma," he said at last. "And if I know Padmé Amidala, she'll do the right thing."

Chapter 62

Sixty-two

Kamino

"So how was school?" Padmé asked the twins as they sat down to dinner.

"Boring," Leia replied at once. "Really boring."

Luke looked at his sister. "I thought you *liked* school," he said.

"I do," Leia shot back. "It's just....just not the same if we're not there," she explained.

"You mean because *Gerrard* isn't here," Luke taunted.

"Who's *Gerrard*?" Padmé asked, deciding to step in before things escalated further.

"An older boy at school that Leia's got the hots for," Luke said at once.

"I do *not* have the hots for him!" Leia protested angrily. "Just shut up, Luke!"

"Make me!" Luke shot back.

The door chime sounded as Padmé's patience ran out. "Enough!" she said angrily as she stood up. "Both of you!"

Luke and Leia looked at one another, both feeling ashamed to have upset their mother. It was certainly the last thing she needed right now.

Padmé activated the door and it slid open to reveal Sola.

"Sola!" Padmé said as she threw her arms around her sister's neck. "I'm so glad you're here!"

Sola hugged her sister back. "My baby sister needed me," she said. "Where else would I be?"

Padmé closed her eyes, the emotions she'd been fighting so hard to keep at bay coming dangerously close to the surface.

Sola pulled back and took her sister by the shoulders. "I want to know everything," she said, looking at Padmé's face closely. "I can tell you're holding in a lot right now, Padmé," she continued.

Padmé couldn't deny it, and simply nodded. "Come inside," she said, taking Sola's hand.

The twins looked up as their aunt and mother entered the room.

"Aunt Sola!" Leia said as she and Luke stood up to greet their aunt.

Sola smiled as the twins hugged her in greeting. "It's good to see you again," she told them. "I wish it was under happier circumstances," she added.

“Mom told you about the baby?” Luke asked.

Sola’s eyes widened. “Baby??” she said, looking back at her sister. “What are you talking about?”

“Come and sit down,” Padmé said. “And I’ll tell you everything.”

Sola followed her sister to the sofa in the adjoining room as the twins returned to their dinner.

“Padmé, are you pregnant?” Sola asked once they had sat down.

The question undid Padmé, and she lost control of the tears she’d held back all day. “I was,” she said through her tears. “He’s gone now,” she added.

“Oh, Padmé,” Sola said, putting her arms around her sister and holding her tightly. “I’m so sorry.”

After a few moments, Padmé proceeded to tell her sister everything that had transpired over the past few days, culminating in her miscarriage. It was difficult for her to get through it, but it helped having Sola’s sympathetic ear.

“You poor thing,” Sola said, taking Padmé’s hand. “You’ve been through so much lately. But the emperor is dead now, and Vader is going to be able to live without the mask,” she pointed out.

Padmé nodded. “That’s what’s kept me going, Sola,” she said quietly. “That and just knowing that Luke and Leia need me. I have to be there for them, as hard as this has all been; I have to think of them. They’ve been through a lot too, and they need me. I’m not going to fold on them, no matter how hard things get.”

Sola smiled. “You are one amazing woman, you know that?” she said.

Padmé shrugged somewhat self-consciously. “I don’t know about that,” she said. “I’m just trying to survive, Sola. Having you here will help me do that,” she added giving her sister’s hand a squeeze.

“Mom?”

Padmé looked up to see the twins standing before her. “What is it?” she asked.

“We just wanted to apologize for being so annoying earlier,” Luke said.

“We should be more sensitive and less selfish,” Leia added.

Sola smiled, thoroughly impressed by her nephew and niece.

“It’s okay,” Padmé said. “You weren’t not selfish.”

“Yes we were,” Luke insisted. “We shouldn’t have been fighting about stupid things when you have been through so much. It was pretty rotten of us.”

Padmé smiled, and took a hand of each twin. “Thank you for apologizing,” she said. “But I’m not the only one who’s been through a lot. I know how worried you two have been about me and your father.”

Luke and Leia nodded in agreement.

“Do you think we can see Dad?” Leia asked as she and Luke sat down.

Padmé looked at her sister briefly before replying. “I don’t know about that, Leia,” she said. “You’ve never so much seen him without his mask. I’m not sure you’re ready to see him in his current state.”

“Have you seen him without his mask?” Luke asked.

Padmé nodded. “A few times, yes,” she replied.

“What did he look like?” Leia asked.

“I’m sure you can imagine,” Padmé said. “It wasn’t easy seeing him that way, and I know it wasn’t easy for him to let me see him that way.”

“But now he’s healed, right?” Leia asked. “He’s going to look the way he did before he went to Mustafar, isn’t he?”

“Yes, I hope so,” Padmé replied. “We’ll have to wait a few weeks for that to take place, though,” she added.

“We don’t want to wait that long,” Luke insisted. “Now that we know what happened to him, we’re prepared to see him, Mom. We miss him, it’s been days since we saw him!” Leia nodded in agreement.

Padmé sighed and looked at her sister who merely smiled.

“Very well,” Padmé relented at last. “When I go to see him in the morning you two can come with me, okay?”

The twins smiled in response.

The Death Star

Governor Tarkin stood with his hands clasped behind his back, gazing out at the stars. It had been an eventful week, and Tarkin had been deep in contemplation for days. The emperor’s death had created a vacuum, one which should have been filled by Darth Vader. But Vader was injured, and no one knew how long he’d be out of commission. So that left the door wide open. Tarkin was an ambitious man, and knew that opportunities such as these came along once in a lifetime, if ever. He also knew that he needed to act quickly and carefully, for while the Imperial Senate was officially in charge, Tarkin knew that their power was nothing compared to the power he possessed as commander of the Death Star.

Ten years had passed since the Death Star’s construction had commenced, and in that time Tarkin had taken a lot of ribbing from comrades because it was taking so long. But Tarkin had taken it all in stride. He knew that once the station was operational, there would be a shift of power in the galaxy. Tarkin and Tarkin alone knew that the emperor had planned to do away with the Senate once the threat of the Death Star made them irrelevant. Fear would keep the systems in line, fear and the well paid, morally impoverished governors that Palpatine had carefully placed to control those systems. But Palpatine had died before ridding the galaxy of the Republic’s last vestige of democracy, and, what was worse; the Senate was now in control of the Empire. And that didn’t sit well with Tarkin. He needed to find a way to take matters into his own hand, to take control of the Empire. The Death Star was his way of doing that.

But in order for the mighty station to work to his advantage, its weapons needed to be operational. And once they were...

Tarkin turned as he saw his faithful side kick Tagge approaching. "Report?" he asked.

"They're running a test stimulation," Tagge informed him. "We'll know within the hour."

Tarkin nodded, and then returned his attention to the stars, a hint of a smile on his gaunt, ghoul like visage.

Kamino

The door opens and Anakin enters carrying breakfast tray full of food.

"Good morning," I say. "Where did you run off to?"

He holds up the tray. "Food," he tells me. "I told the kitchen staff that we don't plan to leave this room for at least a week, so you'd better give us plenty of food."

I'm mortified. "You didn't say that, did you??" I ask.

Anakin nods, trying to keep a straight face. "Yep," he replies. "I told them that we plan to spend the next week in bed, so we need plenty of food to keep our strength up."

I watch him closely, seeing that he is obviously lying. "You are a terrible liar, Anakin Skywalker," I tell him as he sits down on the side of the bed.

He laughs and leans over to give me a kiss. "Maybe so," he admits. "But I have talents in other areas that make up for it."

"Oh, most definitely," I reply with a smile. "I had no idea you were so... multi-talented."

"To tell you the truth, neither did I," he replies with a grin. "We make a rather good team, don't you think?"

I nod. "Yes, very compatible," I agree.

"Are you hungry?" he asks me as he set the tray down on the bed. "I am so hungry I could eat a...what do you call those things up on that hill?"

"A shaak," I reply, reaching for a piece of fruit.

"Yeah, a shaak," he replies.

"Well I don't imagine there's any of that in the kitchen, so you'll have to settle for what's on this tray," I say with a laugh. "Looks like quite an assortment of goodies."

"It does," he agrees. "But you are far more delectable than anything here," he tells me with a grin.

I smile. "Eat, Ani," I tell him, handing him a piece of fruit. "You need to replenish your strength."

"Does that mean you are planning on seducing me again, Senator?" he teases.

I laugh. "You never know," I reply with a smile.

He takes the fruit from me and takes a bite.

"One week," I say thoughtfully. "Do you think that is enough time?"

He shakes his head. "I'm afraid not," he replies with a serious expression. "I'm sure it will take at least a lifetime to fully explore all the sensual delights of my new wife."

I giggle as I bite a piece of fruit, and the juice dribbles down my chin.

"See what you made me do?" I say in mock irritation.

"How thoughtless of me," he says, setting down the pear he is eating and moving over to me. "Here, let me help you clean that up."

"I'm only kidding, Ani," I say, "it's okay..." I stop as he licks the juice off of my chin.

"Oh, you got some on your neck too," he says, and proceeds to slowly run his tongue over my neck. "You really should be more careful."

"Yes, I really should," I reply.

He looks up at me with a smile. "I don't think I will ever get enough of you," he tells me softly. "Not in a hundred life times."

"No?" I ask.

He shakes his head, his eyes looking at my mouth. "No," he replies as he leans toward me and kisses my mouth.

I pull back and look at him. "Does this mean you've built your strength back?" I tease.

He grins at me. "You could say so," he tells me, kissing me again.

Padmé woke up at this point, as the reality of life came crashing down upon her. She sat up in bed, pushing away the remnants of her dream, telling herself that soon Anakin would be whole again; but *will he truly be Anakin again? Ever??*

Getting out of bed, Padmé headed to the fresher to start her day. She was anxious to see how her husband had progressed since she'd seen him the previous day; even more so by the fact that Luke and Leia wanted to come with her to see their father. Padmé wasn't certain that the twins were ready to see their father, whom they'd come to idolize, so vulnerable and helpless. And yet, there was no sense in hiding the truth of his condition from them. Luke and Leia had heard all the ugly truth about their father's injuries; now it was time to see the process by which he would be made whole again.

Both Luke and Leia were quiet as they walked with their mother to the ICU, and it didn't take a Force sensitive to see how anxious they were. Finally, when they reached the doors that lead to the unit where Vader was, Padmé stopped and turned to them.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" she asked one last time.

Luke and Leia nodded at once.

"Very well," she said, turning and keying in the security code. "Come with me."

"Good morning Lady Vader," the medidroid said in greeting as it saw her. It looked curiously at the twins and then back at her for an explanation.

"This is Luke and this is Leia," Padmé told the droid. "Our children. They are anxious to see their father."

"Of course they are," the droid replied. "Right this way," it said, addressing Luke and Leia.

The twins walked with their mother across the room where a large bacta tank was situated. Luke and Leia looked in fascination at the tank, the body of their father floating within. Both were disappointed that they couldn't see his face, but looked at his healing body with fascination.

"Why is he all curled up like that?" Luke asked the droid.

"That is what we refer to as fetal position," the droid replied. "Sometimes, when a person has suffered extreme physical trauma they will assume this position."

"Why?" Leia asked.

"It's an instinctive reaction," the droid replied. "The brain and vital organs are more protected when the body is curled up in this way."

Luke and Leia nodded in understanding.

"Has his body mass increased since yesterday?" Padmé asked the droid.

"Yes, we noted an eight percent increase," the droid replied.

"Twenty percent, that's great!" Leia exclaimed, looking up at her mother with a smile. "He'll be coming out of there before we know it, Mom!"

Padmé nodded, putting an arm around her daughter. "I hope so," she replied. "We can't stay long," she told the twins. "I don't want to leave Aunt Sola alone for too long."

"Why didn't she just come with us?" Luke asked.

"I suppose she thought this was a private family moment," Padmé replied.

"But she's family," Leia pointed out.

"I know she is," Padmé agreed. "Come on," she said. "Let's get back to her."

"We just want to say goodbye to him," Leia said.

Padmé wasn't sure how that was possible, but reasoned that with Luke and Leia anything was possible.

Dad? Dad can you hear us?

Luke and Leia looked at one another, neither of them sensing a response.

We're here Daddy; we just want you to know that. We love you so much. Everything's going to be okay. We'll see you soon.

Padmé watched them, for the first time in her life wishing she's been born a Force sensitive being.

"Well?" she asked when the twins returned to her. "Do you think he heard you?"

"I think so," Luke replied. 'He can't reply, though,' he added, "but I got the feeling that he knew we were here."

Padmé smiled. "I'm sure he did," she told them. "Come on, you two have school to go to."

Sola had just finished her breakfast when the door chime sounded. She walked over to open the door, revealing a young man she remembered meeting at Padmé's home on Coruscant. He seemed rather surprised to see her.

"Uh, hi," Han said. "Do I have the wrong place? I'm looking for Lady Vader."

"No, you're in the right place," Sola replied. "I'm her sister, Sola Naberrie. We met on Coruscant a few weeks ago."

Han smiled as he recognized her finally. "Oh, yeah!" he said. "I didn't realize you were here, Miss Naberrie," he explained.

Sola returned his smile. "Come on in," she said. "Padmé took Luke and Leia to see their father. She ought to be back soon."

"Good," Han replied. "Because there's something on the holonet she needs to see," he told her, walking into the living area and turning on the holovision.

Sola followed him. "What is it? What's going on?"

Han didn't reply at once, for he was searching through the frequencies to find the news network he'd been watching in his own suite. As he did so, Padmé and the twins returned. He looked over at them as they entered the room.

"Milady, come and see this," he said. "You'll never guess who's out of jail."

Padmé looked at the holovision and gasped when she saw Bail Organa in the midst of a press conference. "How is this possible?"

"According to him the Senate ordered his release," Han told her. "He's been gloating about it for about ten minutes now."

Padmé said nothing, but looked at Leia who was watching the press conference. She hadn't seen her adopted father in months, and the sight of him now filled her with conflicting emotions.

"Leia, are you okay?" Padmé asked.

Leia nodded. "I thought Daddy had him arrested," she said, her eyes fixed on the image of Organa.

"He did," Padmé replied. "But since the Senate is now in charge, they have decided he should be set free," she explained.

"Dad's gonna be mad," Luke commented.

Padmé frowned, realizing her son was right. "Come on," she said, directing the twins away from the holovision. "Time for school."

Luke and Leia left with their mother, Leia taking one more look over her shoulder before leaving the room.

“Luke’s right,” Han said as he sat down on one of the sofas. “Lord Vader *is* going to be mad when he hears about this. He worked hard to arrest Organa.”

Sola nodded as she sat down too. “Luckily he is in no condition to find out about that right now,” she replied.

“Yeah, quite the coincidence, isn’t it?” Han commented.

“What’s a coincidence?” Padmé asked as she returned to the room.

“That Organa’s a free man now that Lord Vader is out of commission,” Han replied. “And doesn’t he just know it, too?” he added, looking back at the smiling image of Organa on the holovision.

Padmé looked at him too, the anger she’d felt the night of the emperor’s party returning as she looked at his smug expression. “Yes, he certainly does,” she agreed. “What have I done, Han? Was I wrong to put the Senate in charge?”

Han was surprised she’d ask him such a question, even though it was a rhetorical one.

“No, Milady,” he replied. ‘You had no choice but to put them in charge. If you hadn’t every power hungry bureaucrat in the Empire would be gunning for control. Order had to be established quickly, and you did that. But this,’ he said, gesturing at the screen. “This is just blatant disregard for Lord Vader’s authority,” he said with a frown. “Organa’s release could be bad, Milady, very bad.”

“I have to agree with Han,” Sola spoke up. ‘Releasing him clearly undermined Vader’s authority,’ she said. “But if Organa is the Rebel sympathizer that Vader believes him to be...” she didn’t finish the sentence, knowing there was no need to.

“I think Anakin needs to return and fast,” Padmé said at last, as fear began to blossom within her. “Before things really get out of hand.”

Chapter 63

Sixty-three

Kamino

Obi-Wan stood outside the doors of the ICU for what seemed to be an eternity. He had suffered nightmares for ten years about what had happened on Mustafar. Many a night he had woken up in a cold sweat with Anakin's screams of agony ringing in his ears. It had broken Obi-Wan's heart to see what had befallen his best friend, and he took a healthy share of the blame for it. *If only he'd told me of his marriage, of his dreams... why didn't I see it?? He was my brother, my best friend... how could I not have seen it?*

"Can I help you sir?"

Obi-Wan looked to see a security guard looking at him suspiciously.

"I'm here to see Lord Vader," Obi-Wan said.

The guard frowned. "Only family is permitted to see him," he replied. "Identification, please?"

"You don't need to see my identification," Obi-Wan said, bending the man's mind with the Force.

"I don't need to see your identification," the man intoned.

"I may go in and see Lord Vader," Obi-Wan suggested next.

"You may go in and see Lord Vader," the guard agreed.

Obi-Wan smiled, and entered the ICU. The droids on duty didn't question his presence, reasoning that if the guards had allowed him in then he must be okay. Obi-Wan looked around and then spied the bacta tank. He felt knots of apprehension in his stomach as he drew closer. And then he saw Vader.

The last time Obi-Wan had seen his best friend outside of the mask had been when he was burning alive on Mustafar. Obi-Wan had not expected him to live, and yet he had, and had suffered immeasurably because of what Obi-Wan had done. And now he was on his way to being healed. The scars that had no doubt been inflicted by the burns were healing, and much fainter than Obi-Wan had expected them to be. There was evidence of bandaging on many parts of his body, but they were all but gone now, dissolved away in the viscous fluid that surrounded Vader's body. Obi-Wan found himself growing emotional as he looked at the helpless, unconscious man who had once been his closest friend.

"Good morning again, Lady Vader."

Obi-Wan turned to see Padmé entering the room. She was surprised to see him and joined him at once.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. "How did you get in?"

"I made a suggestion to the guard that he allow me to enter," Obi-Wan told her. "I wanted to see Anakin. I hope that's acceptable."

Padmé nodded as she looked into the tank at Vader. "Yes, of course," she replied. "He's progressing well," she told him, "but not quickly enough."

"I know how hard it must be to be patient," Obi-Wan told her. "But..."

"No, no you don't understand," Padmé interjected. "It's not just because I miss him, it's because of what is happening on Coruscant. Anakin needs to be able to take control of things while he still can."

Obi-Wan frowned. "I'm afraid I don't understand," he replied. "What's going on?"

"Bail Organa has been released," Padmé told him.

Obi-Wan's eyebrows shot up. "Indeed?" he asked. "Who released him?"

"The Senate," she replied. "I put them in charge, and they've taken it upon themselves to revoke Anakin's order arresting Organa. It doesn't bode well, Obi-Wan. Not at all."

Obi-Wan made no reply, and stroked his beard thoughtfully.

"I know that you and Bail were allies," Padmé told him. "Anakin told me that you and he were planning on taking me and the twins from him."

"We were," Obi-Wan replied, not seeing the point in denying it. "But obviously our plans went awry when the viceroy was arrested. And now... well..."

"Yes, now," Padmé asked. "How do you feel now? I hope you're still not planning anything so asinine."

Obi-Wan's cheeks reddened ever so slightly, and he looked away. "No," he replied quietly. "I can see now that you and Anakin belong together. You needn't worry about my allegiance, Padmé. I promise you."

Padmé nodded, relieved to hear it. "The galaxy is in a very precarious position, Obi-Wan," she told him. "And despite what he did in the past, it needs Anakin's leadership. You can't deny that Organa is part of the Rebel Alliance, and that he will lead the galaxy into civil war if order isn't restored."

Obi-Wan's brows lowered slightly, surprised by her statement. "Order, Padmé?" he asked. "Is that what you'd call what the Empire has provided for the past ten years? You're the last person I'd expect to believe that."

"I don't believe it," Padmé retorted. "Give me a little credit, Obi-Wan. But if war breaks out, all chance of peace is gone forever. If Anakin is in charge, he will make the changes needed to put an end to the tyranny that Palpatine created."

"You believe that you can change him?" Obi-Wan asked pointedly. "That you can influence him to change the Empire?"

"He's already changed," she replied. "You said it yourself. Now that Palpatine is gone, he is free. And once he's well again...yes, I can promise you that he will change things. But he

won't be able to do that if Organa throws the galaxy into a state of utter chaos and conflict again."

What she said made sense, and Obi-Wan wanted more than anything to believe her. But when he thought about the angry young man he confronted on Mustafar, when he thought of the security holos of that same young man slaughtering younglings and then later choking his pregnant wife...

"I don't know what to believe anymore, Padmé," he told her at last, looking back at Vader. "At one point I would have bet my life that Anakin would never have betrayed me; but that changed when he chose the Dark Side. Has he changed? Yes, there is no doubt of that. But is it enough? Can I trust that if he had absolute power he wouldn't turn into another Palpatine? I'm not sure that I can do that."

Padmé was disappointed to hear him say this, and had no words to offer. She loved Anakin despite everything he'd done, and that made her trust him implicitly. But Obi-Wan was looking at things with a much more objective point of view. That made a big difference.

"Why don't you assume control?" Obi-Wan suggested after a moment or two.

Padmé looked at him in surprise. "Me? Are you serious?"

"Yes, very serious," he replied. "You are the wife of Darth Vader; the clone army would follow you and obey your every order. You were a queen and a damn good one if memory serves. Plus you understand the senate and how to handle them. Who better to sort out this mess than you?"

Padmé was taken aback by his suggestion, for this was the last thing she'd considered. But the more she thought of it now, the more it made sense. And yet... She looked back at Vader. "Right now I can't even think about that," she said. "Not while Anakin's in limbo like this."

"What if there was a way to speed up his recovery?" Obi-Wan said.

"What are you talking about?" she asked at once.

"I'm talking about growth accelerators," Obi-Wan told her. "The cloners use them when they are creating the clone army, otherwise it would take years for clones to mature. The technology is here, Padmé. If Anakin is the reason you won't consider this, then this is a solution."

Padmé considered his words for a moment. If there was to be an Empire left for Anakin to rule, someone needed to step in before power hungry pretenders started vying for power. Bail Organa was not to be trusted, that much was certain. And of the Imperial governors that Padmé knew, there was not one among them who was either. So what if she was to step in, in the interim and stabilize things until Anakin returned to action?

Padmé turned to the droid nearby. "I need to talk to one of the technicians at once," she told it.

"Of course," the droid replied. "I'll contact someone at once."

"Does this mean you are going to consider my suggestion?" Obi-Wan asked.

Padmé nodded. “The way I see it, I don’t have a choice,” she said. “I can’t do it alone, though,” she added.

Obi-Wan smiled. “You won’t be,” he assured her. “I promise you.”

Elsewhere on Kamino

Luke watched his sister as they sat through their math class. Her inattentiveness was obvious, and most unlike her. Luke felt certain he knew why she was having trouble focusing; she had not stopped thinking about the Viceroy since seeing him on the holovision earlier.

“You still miss them, don’t you?” Luke finally asked.

Leia turned to him, shocked by his question. “Who?” she asked.

“You know who,” Luke replied as he doodled on his page, which was usually how he spent math class. “Your adoptive parents.”

Leia frowned and faced the screen again where Miss Zadane was demonstrating how to calculate complimentary angles. “Why would I?” she asked tersely. “They lied to me my whole life. They lied to Mom and Dad. Why should I miss them? I don’t care about them at all.”

Luke nodded. “I know they did all that,” he said. “Just like Uncle Owen lied to me when he told me my parents were dead, and that my father had been a navigator on a spice freighter.”

Leia looked at him. “Is that what he told you?”

“Yep,” Luke replied, twirling his pencil easily with two fingers. “I was mad too when I learned that they’d lied, but it didn’t stop me from loving them. Just like you still love your adoptive parents. Only it’s different for you because yours are still alive. You feel guilty because of that. You feel like you’re betraying our parents because you still care about the other parents you had.”

Leia didn’t say anything, her brother’s insight both unnerving her and annoying her. “Maybe,” she said simply as she drew a perfect one hundred and forty-five degree angle on her datapad.

“And now that the Viceroy is on the news, it’s stirred up all those feelings,” Luke continued, “feelings you were trying to forget about.”

Leia frowned as she concentrated on her work. “Would you please do your math?” she said finally. “There’s a test on this next week.”

Luke smiled, knowing he was dead on. He knew his sister well enough by now to be able to read her like a book. And that, Luke decided, was very cool.

The ICU unit

Padmé and Obi-Wan sat waiting in the small office within the ICU unit for a few moments before a technician from the team in charge of Vader’s surgery appeared.

“Is there something you require, Lady Vader?” she asked as she sat down across from them.

“Yes,” Padmé replied at once. “I understand you possess technology which can accelerate the growth process of clones,” she said.

The alien nodded. “Yes, that’s true,” she said. “Otherwise it would take decades for them to mature.”

“Is it possible to use that same technology on my husband?” Padmé asked. “To accelerate to regeneration of his new cells?”

“I’m not sure,” the tech replied. “Cloned tissues are not exactly the same as purely human tissues. However, considering the success we’ve had with Lord Vader’s case so far, I don’t see how this would be a problem.”

“You mean you can do it?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Yes,” the technician replied. “When do you want us to proceed?”

“Immediately,” Padmé replied.

The tech nodded. “Very well,” she said, standing up. “I’ll get things ready right now.”

“How much will this speed up the process?” Obi-Wan asked as he and Padmé stood up as well.

“Once the agent has been introduced into his DNA coding, it will only be a matter of days before the regeneration is complete,” she replied.

Padmé nodded, excitement filling her. “Thank you,” she replied. “I appreciate your extra efforts where my husband is concerned.”

The technician smiled. “Your husband is an extraordinary man, Lady Vader,” she replied. “But I’m sure you know that already,” she added, and then left the room.

“Did you hear that? A matter of days!” Padmé exclaimed happily.

Obi-Wan nodded. “That is remarkable,” he said. “And it makes me question why this wasn’t done for him before now,” he added.

The smile faded from Padmé’s face. “You know why, Obi-Wan,” she said. ‘Palpatine wanted Anakin to remain in that suit for the rest of his life,’ she told him. “He knew that if Anakin were whole again he would destroy him. Keeping him in that suit kept him subservient. Besides, he thrived on Ani’s pain, and being in that suit kept Anakin in pain, emotionally and physically.”

“Yes, you’re right,” Obi-Wan agreed. “The galaxy is a much better place without that monster in it,” he added with a frown.

“I couldn’t agree more,” she replied. “I can’t wait to tell Luke and Leia,” she said, leaving the office.

Obi-Wan followed along, having nothing more pressing to do.

Upon returning to her suite, Padmé was greeted by her sister who had been supervising the twins’ lessons.

“You have a visitor,” Sola informed her. “Waiting in the living room.”

Padmé frowned and looked at Obi-Wan. “Who could it be?” she asked and then entered the room to see for herself.

“Hello Padmé,” Mon Mothma said standing up. “It’s good to see you again.”

Chapter 64

Sixty-four

Padmé was too shocked to say anything for a moment, for Mon Mothma was the last person she'd expected to see.

"Mothma," she said at last, forcing a smile. "What a surprise. What brings you to Kamino?"

"I came to see you," Mothma said, sitting down as Padmé did. Sola and Obi-Wan joined them.

"Yes, I realize that," Padmé replied. "Why? Why did you come to see me?" Mothma glanced nervously at Sola and Obi-Wan, wishing she could speak to Padmé alone, but sensing that wasn't about to happen. "I wanted to make sure you were all right," she began. "I saw you on the press conference and had the feeling there was a lot going on." Padmé lifted an eyebrow. "You could say that," she replied. "Why don't you tell me why you're really here," she said. "I know you well enough to know there's a more pressing matter than merely my well being on your mind."

"You're right," Mothma admitted finally. "There is. I don't need to tell you how much it meant to hear you give control of the Empire to the Senate," she said, a small smile on her face. "After ten years of Imperial tyranny, it's a wonderful breath of fresh air."

Padmé nodded. "Well, someone had to run things until Vader is well enough to do so."

The smile that had formed on Mothma's face faded upon hearing this. "What do you mean?" she asked.

Padmé frowned. "Do I need to spell it out for you?" she asked. "My husband is the rightful ruler of the Empire, Mothma. And he will rule once he is well again, which will be very soon."

"I... I don't understand," Mothma stammered. "I thought that you'd... I mean that we were..."

"What? What did you think?" Padmé asked. "That I was going to betray my husband and hand over control of the Empire to Bail Organa? Yes, I know he's been released."

"Well of course he's been released," Mothma countered somewhat petulantly. "He never should have been arrested in the first place."

"The point is that he was arrested," Padmé countered. "By Darth Vader. Releasing Bail is a clear slap in the face to him and his authority. I was nearly sick watching Bail on the news; he was so smug and pleased with himself."

Mon Mothma was feeling very uncomfortable by this point, and was starting to think that she'd made a big mistake coming here. And yet, the point had been to learn where they stood with Padmé. She had a good idea now just where that was.

"I'm sorry you feel that way," Mothma said rather stiffly. "I'm disappointed, Padmé; I thought you were a champion of democracy. I didn't realize you had become an Imperial sympathizer."

Padmé narrowed her eyes, doing her best to master her anger. "Bail sent you here, didn't he?" she said.

"Senator Organa doesn't give me orders," Mothma replied tersely.

"No?" Padmé challenged. "Your words sound like his words, the same self righteous tone. You can take a message to him, since I know you're going to return directly to him when you leave here," she said.

Mothma said nothing in response, and merely waited for Padmé to continue, her uneasiness showing by now.

"Tell him not to get too comfortable," Padmé said. She stood up at this point. 'I think I'd like you to leave now,' she added. "I have a family to take care of." With that she left the room, leaving a rather awkward silence between Mothma, Sola and Obi-Wan.

"I think it would be best if you honoured my sister's wishes and left, Senator," Sola said. "She doesn't need any more stress in her life right now."

Mothma nodded and stood up, suddenly quite anxious to leave. "I'll show myself out," she said quietly, and then left them.

Padmé found the twins who were taking a break while their class had recess. At once they could see how upset she was.

"What's going on, Mom?" Luke asked her as she sat down. "You're upset."

Padmé sat down with a sigh. "An unwanted visitor," she said simply. "But I don't want to talk about that right now. I have some good news, actually," she told them with an attempt at a smile.

"What is it?" Leia asked.

"Your father's progress is being accelerated," she told them. "He will be able to leave the bacta in a few days."

"That's great!" Luke exclaimed. "How is that possible?"

"The cloners have implemented a growth accelerator," she told them. "It will increase the rate of regeneration of his damaged organs."

"That's amazing," Leia commented with a smile. "But why didn't they just do this from the start?" she asked.

"There was no need to accelerate his progress," Padmé told them. "He was progressing just fine. But things have changed. There is a situation developing on the capital that will require action. Your father's leadership is needed."

"Does the Viceroy of Alderaan have anything to do with this... situation?" Leia asked.

Padmé looked at her daughter, deciding it was pointless to lie to her. “Yes he does,” she replied. “A great deal to do with it, actually. His release from jail is an affront to your father’s authority, and it makes me think Organa is going to try to take control permanently. I intend to stop him.”

“How are you going to do that?” Luke asked.

“I’m going to Coruscant once your father is out of stasis,” she told them. “As the wife of Darth Vader, and as his representative until such time as he can return to his duties himself.”

The twins smiled, liking their mother’s gutsiness.

“I’d give anything to see the senate’s reaction,” Leia said. “I think you should dress all in black, Mom, like Dad does. That would really freak them out.”

Padmé smiled. “That isn’t exactly what my intention is,” she told her. “But it might be good for....dramatic effect.”

Luke laughed. “You’re so cool, Mom,” he said. “Are we coming with you?”

“No,” Padmé replied. ‘You’ll stay here with your Aunt Sola and Obi-Wan,’ she told them. “I’ll take Han with me. Once your father is up and about, you will return to Coruscant with him.”

The twins nodded in understanding. “Sounds like a great plan, Mom,” Leia said. “But what will Dad think of you doing this?”

Padmé had no answer, for she really hadn’t considered his reaction. “I don’t know,” she replied finally. “But at this point, we don’t have time to consider that.”

Luke and Leia knew exactly what that meant: their father wouldn’t know until it was too late to stop her.

“Don’t worry, Mom,” Luke assured her. “We’ll cover for you.”

Padmé smiled. “Thanks Luke,” she replied. “I knew I could count on you.”

En route to Coruscant

Mon Mothma had been quiet and contemplative for most of the voyage back to the capital. Padmé had not at all been the way she’d expected. Her loyalty to Vader surprised Mothma, especially considering all that Vader had done to her in the past. Bail Organa had told Mothma horror stories about Vader and how he had attacked Padmé when she was pregnant, nearly killing her. And yet, Padmé seemed to actually care about this man.

Mothma’s musings were interrupted by her comlink and she activated it at once. It was Bail Organa.

“Hello Bail,” Mothma said. “I’m on my way back to the capital.”

“So soon?” he replied, the surprise evident in his voice.

“Things didn’t go very well with Padmé I’m afraid,” she told him. “In fact, they went rather badly.”

“Why? What happened? What did she say?”

“She’s not happy that you were released from jail,” Mothma told him. “And considers it an affront to Vader’s authority.”

Organa didn’t reply for a moment. “So... is she angry with us?”

Mothma was glad that it was merely a voice communication, for she rolled her eyes at this point. “What do *you* think?” she asked. “She told me to give you a message,” she added, remembering what Padmé had said.

Organa was almost afraid to ask. “What was that?” he asked.

“She said not to get too comfortable,” Mothma replied. “Take from that what you will.”

Organa frowned, his mind working a mile a minute. “What the hell does *that* mean?” he asked. “What is she up to? Has Vader recovered so soon?”

“No, I don’t believe he has,” Mothma replied. “I saw no sign of him. And as for what she is planning, I have no idea. But I had the impression that we’ll find out soon enough.”

“Perhaps,” Organa replied. “There’s an old expression on Alderaan, Mon: make hay while the sun shines. We need to get busy.”

“Yes, I think you’re right,” Mothma replied. ‘We’ll discuss this further when I’m back on the capital,’ she told him. “I’ll contact you when I arrive.”

“Very well,” he replied. “I’ll talk to you soon.”

Kamino— the next morning

It was with a sense of great expectation that Padmé awoke the next morning. It had been nearly twenty-four hours since the growth accelerators had been introduced into Vader’s DNA coding, and there was bound to be significant changes in him. Padmé got out of bed, anxious to get to the ICU.

Luke and Leia were up early as well, as eager to visit their father as Padmé was.

“Do you think Dad will be ready to leave the bacta today?” Luke asked his mother as she joined them at breakfast.

“I can’t say for sure,” Padmé replied. “We’ll find out soon enough I suppose.”

Leia smiled. “I can’t wait to see his face,” she said. “He looked so handsome in the holovid he showed me. Will he look like that again?”

“Well, he’s a little older now,” Padmé reminded her. “But I think he will look pretty much the same, yes,” she added.

“Can we miss school today to come with you?” Luke asked. “Please??”

Padmé smiled. “You can miss the morning classes,” she replied, “but not the afternoon. I don’t want you getting behind.”

“Okay Mom,” Leia replied. “I can’t wait to see Dad,” she added with a smile.

“Neither can I,” Padmé responded.

The Death Star

General Tagge read the message over, certain that he had misread it. But when he read it a second and even a third time, it was the same: *Effective immediately the Imperial Senate will assume governorship of the following systems...* the communiqué went on to enumerate a rather lengthy list of systems, all systems, Tagge noted, that had been held by influential members of the Imperial bureaucracy. “What the devil is going on,” Tagge muttered. He looked up as the door to his office opened, and seeing the look on Tarkin’s face, he knew at once that he too had heard the news.

“You’ve heard?” Tagge asked.

Tarkin nodded a deep scowl on his already menacing visage. “They won’t get away with this, Cassio,” he vowed. “Organa won’t get away with this, I promise you.”

“You know what he’s doing, don’t you?” Tagge asked. “He’s removing all the men that Palpatine placed in office,” he continued.

“I can see that,” Tarkin snapped. “He’s trying to unravel the Imperial bureaucracy, but he’s mistaken if he thinks he’ll succeed. He has no idea what he’s up against, my friend.”

“A half completed space station with weapons that still don’t work?” Tagge remarked dryly.

Tarkin smiled. “Oh they’ll work, Cassio,” he assured his friend. “Soon enough they’ll be up and running. I’ve diverted all manpower from the construction of the station to the weapons array and battery. The engineers have assured me that the weapons will be working within a week.”

“A week? By then Organa could have ever governor in the Empire out of work,” Tagge commented dourly.

“He may,” Tarkin replied. “But that won’t change the awesome power of this station. Let him enjoy his brief feeling of power, Tagge. It will end soon enough, I assure you.”

Tagge frowned, not sure he believed his colleague. But he said nothing, knowing it was wise not to make an enemy of Tarkin.

Kamino

Leaving Sola behind to contact her own family, Padmé and the twins left after breakfast for the ICU, all three of them excited and hopeful.

“Good morning Lady Vader,” the droid said in greeting as they entered. “And to you as well, Miss Leia and Master Luke.”

“How is our father today?” Leia asked.

“Has he finished regenerating?” Luke asked, causing Padmé to smile.

“Come and see for yourselves,” the droid suggested.

The twins and their mother followed it to the bacta tank, where a remarkable sight met their eyes. Although still in a fetal position, it was clear that Vader now had fully developed legs and arms. There was even hair on his head now, the very same shade of blonde that Luke had.

“Look at him, Mom!” Leia cried, grabbing her mother’s hand. “He’s whole!”

Padmé nodded, unable to take her eyes away from him. “I can’t believe it,” she said softly. “It was so fast!”

“The growth accelerators work very quickly, Milady,” the droid assured her. “And since Lord Vader’s organs had already begun the regeneration process, their growth was remarkably fast.”

“Can he leave the bacta tank now?” Luke asked.

“I think we’d like to keep him in it for another twenty-four hours at least,” the droid replied. “His internal organs may not be as well developed yet as what you are looking at now. One of our doctors will be able to make that determination.”

Padmé nodded. “We’d like to know what that is as soon as possible,” she told the droid.

“Of course, Milady,” the droid replied. “I’ll signal you as soon as an examination has been conducted with the prognosis.”

“Thank you,” Padmé replied. She smiled. *Not much longer, Ani*, she thought with excitement. *Not much longer until we’re together again.*

Chapter 65

Sixty-five

Coruscant

“What is she up to?” Bail asked, pacing up and down in Mothma’s office. “Did she give you no idea? None at all?”

Mothma sighed. “I told you what she said,” she replied.

“Yes you did,” he replied. “Don’t get too comfortable. What is that, a threat?? Is she planning on having me arrested again?”

“I don’t know, Bail,” Mothma replied. “Perhaps you ought to talk to her yourself.”

Organa frowned. “If she gave you a cold reception, imagine what she’d do if I showed up,” he commented.

“Well, the way I see it, you have two choices, Bail,” Mothma said, growing tired of the conversation. ‘You can talk to her and ask her outright what her plans are,’ she continued. “Or you can just sit tight and wait.”

Organa looked at her. “You know how I hate to wait,” he grumbled.

Mothma smiled. “I did say you have two choices, Bail,” she replied. “But you may have a difficult time speaking to her privately. Her sister and General Kenobi seem quite protective of her.”

“General Kenobi?” Organa asked in astonishment. “He was there? With Padmé??”

Mothma nodded. “Yes, I was quite surprised to see him as well,” she replied. “I thought he’d died in the Purges.”

“No, he was one of only two Jedi to survive,” Organa told her, his mind starting to work feverishly. ‘So he’s with Padmé,’ he pondered aloud. “I wonder how he got out of jail. The last I heard he’d been apprehended by Vader’s goons. I wonder if Vader even knows he’s free...”

Mothma looked at Organa, getting the impression that he knew a lot more than he was letting on.

Organa looked at Mothma, realizing he’d lost her. “I have it,” he said at last. “I will contact Obi-Wan. If he’s close to the situation, perhaps he can shed some light on what is going on with her.”

Mothma nodded. “If he’ll tell you,” she put in.

Organa smiled. “Oh, he’ll tell me,” he assured her. “Obi-Wan and I have an understanding. He’ll tell me everything I need to know, Mothma; that I promise you.”

Mothma said nothing, and watched as he left her office. She then stood up to make herself a cup of tea, deciding that it had been a very long day.

Kamino

Obi-Wan Kenobi was just getting ready to go to bed when his comlink sounded. He was surprised that someone would be contacting him at such a late hour, but had promised Padmé to be at her disposal whenever he needed her. Sitting down on the edge of his bed he activated the comlink.

“Kenobi here,” he said.

“Obi-Wan, it’s good to hear your voice,” said a most unexpected voice on the other end.

Kenobi frowned. “Senator Organa?”

“Yes it’s me,” Organa replied. “Mothma told me that you were on Kamino. I was rather surprised to hear it, actually, particularly since the last I heard you’d been imprisoned by Vader.”

“Well, a lot has happened since then,” Kenobi replied carefully. “Far more than I am at liberty to discuss.”

Although he couldn’t see the viceroy’s face, Obi-Wan could sense his surprise. “Oh? And why is that?” he asked finally.

Obi-Wan made no reply immediately, already thinking he’d said too much. “What can I do for you, Senator?” he asked calmly.

“What can I do for you?” Organa replied, the frustration evident in his voice. “You’re there with Vader’s wife, out of jail, and you have to ask? What the devil is going on, Obi-Wan?”

“Senator, I believe that I’ve already stated that I am not liberty to discuss the reasons I am here,” Kenobi answered.

“Obi-Wan listen to me,” Organa said. “There’s still a chance to make our plan work. Now is the perfect time! Vader’s in stasis, and...”

“I will not betray the trust of someone who needs me,” Obi-Wan interjected. “And right now Padmé needs me.”

“Yes she does,” Organa agreed. “That’s why we have to act quickly!”

“I’m afraid that’s impossible,” Obi-Wan replied.

“Why?!” Organa asked in exasperation. “Because Vader’s injured? Or is there another reason?” Organa pressed.

Obi-Wan smiled. “Senator, it is very late here,” he said. “I was just on my way to bed. Perhaps we could continue this conversation when we see one another next.”

“But when...”

But Kenobi ended the transmission, cutting the Viceroy in mid-sentence, and, he realized, cutting off all alliance with him as well.

The next morning

The medidroids were checking over Vader's medical status as two members of the surgical team entered the room.

"Well?" one of them asked as they approached the bacta tank. "Are we ready?"

"Yes sir," one droid replied. "Lord Vader's organ systems are all stable and fully regenerated."

The technicians nodded and looked at one another. "It's time," one said.

"Yes," the other agreed. "Has Lady Vader been alerted?"

"Not yet," his comrade replied. "Perhaps we ought to wait until he's cleaned up and resting before we do."

"Good enough," the other tech agreed, and then turned to the droids. "Prepare to take Lord Vader out of the bacta," he instructed the droids.

"At once," the droid replied and set to work at once to remove Vader from the tank.

Coruscant

Bail Organa stood in his office looking out the window at the busy Coruscant traffic. He had been brooding over the strange conversation he'd had with Obi-Wan Kenobi earlier. The last time he'd seen Obi-Wan, they'd agreed that the best course of action would be to take Padmé and the twins away from Vader. They agreed that she couldn't possibly be happy with Vader, and that she was only remaining with him in order to be with the twins. And now that Vader was incapacitated, the time was perfect to put their plan into action. But Kenobi wouldn't hear of it. More than that, he would not explain why. *Someone has got to him, Organa reasoned with a frown. But who? With Vader in stasis, who could influence a mind like Kenobi's?* It didn't make sense, and Organa didn't know where to go for answers. Perhaps Padmé herself was the only one who could give him the answers he needed. But the last time he'd spoken to her, it had gone rather badly. Very badly in fact. *So what makes you think she'll tell you anything now?*

"Senator Organa?"

Organa looked over to the doorway where his administrative assistant stood.

"Yes?"

"Sir, Governor Tarkin is on the comm.. He wants to talk to you."

Kamino

Padmé and the twins walked to the ICU, the excitement they are felt buoying their steps. The medidroid had contacted Padmé thirty minutes earlier to inform her that they were removing Vader from the bacta tank. And in a few minutes they would see him. Whole. Healed. Healthy once more. It had not been easy for Padmé to see her Ani's face so badly scarred and ravaged; but it hadn't changed the way she felt about him. And now she would see the face she'd longed to see for ten long years.

"Will Dad be awake?" Luke asked as they approached the ICU.

“Not likely,” Padmé replied. “They’ve only just taken him out of the bacta.”

“I can’t wait to see him,” Leia said with a smile. “I can’t wait to kiss his face for real.”

Padmé smiled in response.

Finally they reached the ICU and entered as soon as Padmé had keyed in the security code. They entered the room and their eyes were immediately drawn to the bacta tank, which, of course, was empty now.

“Lady Vader?”

Padmé and the twins turned to the medidroid who stood in a doorway on the far side of the room.

“He’s in here,” the droid informed them.

At once Padmé, Luke and Leia walked over to the doorway and followed the droid into the room.

Padmé’s eyes darted around the room, searching out her husband, as Luke and Leia did the same. And then they saw him, and at once approached the bed. For a few moments none of them spoke, and simply looked at him.

His skin, which had been so damaged and scarred by the fire, was now clear and smooth once more. On top of his head was the beginning of a healthy crop of blond hair, the same shade as Luke’s. His hands, which rested above the blanket that covered him from the waist down, were just as Padmé remembered them to bed: large and strong and fully human once more.

“He’s so...handsome!” Leia said finally.

Padmé nodded, reaching out and taking one of his hands. Her eyes filled with tears as she did so, the feeling of his warm skin against hers making it all so real.

“Lord Vader’s recovery has been truly remarkable,” one of the droids told her. “Our physicians are very pleased.”

“I can appreciate how they feel,” Padmé replied with a smile. ‘I can’t express how much this means to me,’ she said, looking up at the twins. “To us.”

Luke and Leia nodded, hardly able to tear their eyes way from their father’s face.

“Good morning Lady Vader.”

Padmé looked up to see one of the members of the surgical team entering the room. She smiled.

“This is miraculous,” she said with emotion. “Thank you for saving my husband’s life.”

The technician was a little taken aback by her praise and simply smiled. He looked down at Vader’s sleeping form. “Well it was your persistence that forced us to stretch our surgical muscles, as it were. We’ve been enriched by the experience as well.”

“How long will he be asleep?” Leia asked him.

“We will begin to wake him up slowly,” the doctor told her. “A little at a time.”

“How long is that gonna take?” Luke asked.

The doctor smiled at the boy’s impatience. “I would say your father will be fully awake by nightfall, young Luke,” he replied.

Luke and Leia looked at one another excitedly, knowing that it would be a long day indeed.

“Why will it take so long?” Padmé asked, sharing her children’s impatience.

“Lord Vader was in stasis for almost a week, Milady,” he reminded her. “We must reverse the effects of the stasis gradually to avoid shocking his system. It’s important that you are all here with him,” he continued, “talking to him. It will help him return to consciousness.”

“You mean we can stay here with him?” Luke asked.

“It would benefit your father if you did, yes,” the doctor replied.

“I guess we can’t go to school today then,” Leia put in, trying not to smile.

“And I know how much that breaks your hearts,” Padmé said with a smile.

The twins laughed. “I think we’ll get over it,” Luke told her with a grin.

Over the next several hours Padmé and her children stayed at Vader’s side, talking to him, to one another, laughing together; anything to stimulate his unconscious mind.

“Have you sensed any change in his level of consciousness?” Padmé asked the twins from time to time. And for the first hour or so they sensed no change. But into the last part of the second hour, they began to sense something starting to stir within their father’s mind. It was very subtle, but both of the twins sensed it, and told their mother at once.

“See if you can contact him,” Padmé suggested. “Tell him we’re here.”

The twins nodded, and focused their mind on reaching the slowly awakening mind of their father.

Dad? Dad can you hear me? It’s Luke.

I’m here too, Daddy. We’re so relieved that you’re well again. We’ve missed you so much.

Mom is here too, Dad. She’s been going nuts without you. I know she wishes she could talk to you right now.

The twins waited for a response, but there was only silence. But that didn’t deter them. Leia looked up at her mother. “Nothing yet Mom,” she said, knowing how anxious Padmé was. “Is there something you want us to tell him? Maybe that will trigger something.”

Padmé nodded. “Tell him how much I love him,” she said softly.

Leia smiled, and then returned her focus to her father.

Mom wanted me to give you a message, Daddy. She wants you to know how much she loves you.

Tell her... tell her I love her too...

Luke and Leia smiled, and looked up their mother who was watching them expectantly.

“He loves you too, Mom,” Leia told her with a smile.

Padmé sat down, the relief she felt almost too much to bear. She looked down at Vader, and gently stroked the side of his face. “Welcome back, Ani,” she said with a smile.

Chapter 66

Sixty-six

Obi-Wan Kenobi arrived at the ICU around midday, his presence having been requested by Padmé. He felt nervous and excited all at once, the prospect of seeing the face of Anakin Skywalker once more filling him with mixed emotions. Still, Padmé had asked him to come and take the twins for some lunch, and he wasn't about to let her down.

"Lord Vader is in there, sir," the medidroid directed Obi-Wan as he entered the ICU.

"Thank you," Obi-Wan said, and headed into the adjacent room at once. The twins stood with their back to him, blocking his view of Vader. Padmé saw him enter and smiled.

"Hello," she said. "Come and see."

Obi-Wan smiled nervously and walked over to the bed where Vader was asleep surrounded by his family. Seeing his face again, Obi-Wan had to fight the emotions that rose quickly to the surface. "This is incredible," he said softly.

Padmé nodded, seeing how affected Obi-Wan was by seeing the face of his one time friend again.

"It is," she agreed. 'But it angers me to think that he could have been helped ten years ago,' she added, looking down at Vader again. "He could have been spared ten years of torment in that suit."

Obi-Wan was silent, his own sense of guilt filling him as he reflected that it was because of him that Vader had needed the suit in the first place. "No doubt Palpatine wanted him to remain in pain," he commented. "He was a sadistic man."

Padmé frowned, the thought of him making her blood run cold even now. "He was a monster," she said quietly. She pushed the thought of him from her mind and looked up at the twins. "I want you two to go have some lunch with Obi-Wan," she said.

"What about you?" Luke asked.

"I'm not hungry," Padmé replied. "I'll get something later."

"Mom you have to eat," Leia protested.

Padmé smiled. "I'll be fine, really."

Luke and Leia exchanged a look, realizing that their mother was just as stubborn as their father.

"We won't be long, younglings," Obi-Wan assured them. "I know how anxious you are to be with your father right now."

"He'll be awake soon," Padmé said. "Maybe by the time you come back," she added.

"I hope so," Leia said. She and Luke looked at their father one more time before leaving with Obi-Wan.

Padmé watched them leave, and then pulled her chair over to Vader's bed once more, lifting one of his large hands with hers. "Wake up, Ani," she said, laying his hand against her cheek. "Please wake up. I miss you so much."

Coruscant

Nervous tension filled Bail Organa as he opened his communication screen. Governor Wilhuff Tarkin was a man that Organa had met only once, but it had not been a meeting that Organa had enjoyed. He remembered the governor as being cold, arrogant and more than a little weird. *And now he wants to talk to me*, he reflected.

"Governor Tarkin," Organa began, assuming his best diplomatic smile. "What can I do for you?"

Tarkin smiled, but it was an empty smile that never reached his eyes. It made Organa shudder. "I wanted to congratulate you on your recent...emancipation, Senator," he began.

Organa lifted an eyebrow, not believing for a moment that was the true reason for the communication. "Thank you," he replied, doing his best to maintain his cool.

Tarkin nodded. "And you certainly didn't waste any time, did you?" he continued, the façade of affability starting to wear thin. "Removing key personnel from their positions was quite a bold move, Senator. One might even call it foolhardy."

Organa frowned. "Excuse me?" he asked. "In case you missed the press conference, Governor, the Imperial Senate is in charge. That means we make the decisions now, Tarkin."

"Oh I know exactly what it means," Tarkin replied with a thin smile. "But I must warn you, Senator, that there are many in the Empire who do not recognize your...authority."

"Is that so?" Organa asked, growing uneasy.

Tarkin nodded. "Yes," he replied. "There are many powerful people in this Empire, Senator," he continued. "You may wish to reconsider your recent decisions rather than upset these people."

"Are you threatening me, Governor?" Organa asked at last.

Tarkin smiled. "Consider it some friendly advice, Senator," he said. "I really do hate to make threats."

"You don't frighten me, Tarkin," Organa retorted. "You may have had the emperor's favour, but the emperor is dead. There is a new era about to begin, Tarkin," he boasted. "And men like you have no place in it."

Tarkin's smile grew. "You have forty-eight hours to reconsider your recent political decisions," he said.

"Or what?" Organa asked.

"Or you will most certainly regret them," Tarkin replied. "Forty-eight hours, Senator." And with that he ended the transmission.

Organa sat for a moment, too angry and too stunned to move. And then he stood up and went to tell Mon Mothma about the disturbing conversation he'd just had.

Kamino

Slowly but surely, Vader returned to consciousness. He had sensed the presence of his children in his mind, and knew that Padmé was nearby. The sound of her voice and her warm, soothing presence were his beacon. He could feel how anxious she was, and fought with all his strength to open his eyes.

Padmé could see his eyes moving under their lids, and squeezed his hand in encouragement. "Ani, I'm right here," she said. "Please open your eyes; I know you can do it!"

Vader heard her words, far more clearly than he had earlier. Although they felt heavy as lead, he pushed himself to open his eyes, and was rewarded with the face of his wife when he succeeded. Padmé smiled the joy she felt seeing him awake radiating from her.

"Hi," she said simply, tears pricking her eyes.

"Hi," he replied softly, the sound of his voice startling him. His eyes moved to the hand that Padmé held in hers, his hand. It was a human hand. Vader lifted his other hand and looked at it, turning it over slowly, astonished by the sight of it. Tentatively he brought his hands to his face, almost afraid to see what he would find. His eyes met Padmé's as his finger tips reached smooth, human skin.

"How?" he asked.

"Obi-Wan and I brought you here after your fight with Palpatine," she told him. 'We're on Kamino. They used the cellular material that you'd given them to regenerate new organs for you.' She smiled as the tears welled up in her eyes. "You're whole again, Anakin."

Vader was too overwhelmed to say anything for a moment, the joy he felt immeasurable. He drew a deep breath, the sensation of breathing with healthy, human lungs again more of a pleasure than he'd ever imagined.

"I... I can't believe it," he said at last. And then he remembered what had happened. 'Are you okay?' he asked, recalling her abduction. "Is the baby okay?"

Padmé looked away, the anguish welling up within her at his question. "I'm fine," she said quietly.

"And the baby?" he asked, starting to get a bad feeling. When she said nothing, his fears grew, and he moved his hand to touch her abdomen. He frowned as he felt the despair within her, the feeling of... "No," he said as he looked up into her eyes, knowing without her telling him what had happened.

Padmé's eyes filled with tears as she nodded. "He's gone," she said softly. "I lost our baby, Ani," she told him tearfully.

Vader drew her closer, wrapping his arms around her. Padmé welcomed his embrace, the feeling of his arms around her again after so long making the pain of their loss somewhat easier to bear.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I was so overwhelmed by everything; so much was going on, that..."

"Don't," he said, cutting her off. "You've been through hell, Padmé. What happened wasn't your fault. If anyone is to blame it's that bastard Palpatine."

Padmé pulled back and looked at him, nodding in agreement. "I know," she said softly, wiping her tears away. "The doctor said I could still have more babies," she told him.

Vader nodded, a smile forming on his face. "Then that gives us something to look forward to," he told her, taking her hand.

Padmé smiled in response, just as the twins entered the room. When they saw that their father was awake, they raced over to him at once.

"Dad! Dad!!" they cried, attacking him with hugs and kisses, the first they'd ever been able to give him. Vader took them both in one enormous bear hug, kissing them each repeatedly, delighted to be able to do so at last. Obi-Wan stood at the doorway for a moment, watching the joyful scene before him. He smiled, and then turned and left, deciding to give the family their privacy.

"Dad, you look *awesome!*" Luke told his father as Leia nodded her enthusiastic agreement.

"How do you feel?" Leia asked.

Vader thought for a moment. It had been so long since he had actually felt no pain that he hardly knew how to respond to his daughter's question. "I feel...fantastic," he said at last. "I can hardly believe it," he added with a smile, looking back at Padmé.

Padmé smiled back at him and gave his hand a squeeze. She looked up as she saw a doctor enter the room.

"Well, Lord Vader," the doctor said as she walked over to the bed. "You're looking very well. How are you feeling? Any pain or numbness?"

Vader shook his head. "No, not at all," he replied. "I am thirsty though," he added.

The doctor sent a droid at once to fetch Vader a drink of water.

"How long do I have to stay here?" Vader asked next.

"I suppose that depends on how quickly you recover your strength," the physician replied. "You've been unconscious for a week, Lord Vader with nothing but intravenous fluids to sustain you."

"You mean he needs to eat?" Luke asked.

The doctor smiled. "Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying," she replied. She looked at Vader. "That is, if you're feeling up to it," she said.

"I think I'm feeling up to just about anything right now," Vader told her with a smile.

The doctor laughed. "Well, let's not rush things, Lord Vader. I know how anxious you are to get out of here, but you mustn't push yourself too hard."

“Now *that* I’d like to see,” Padmé quipped at this point. Vader looked up at her in surprise as the twins giggled.

“I think we can start you off with something nutritious to eat,” the doctor said. ‘And perhaps after a little while we can get you up and walking around to try out those new legs. How does that sound?’

“It sounds like a miracle,” Padmé said. “Thank you again, Doctor. We are all so grateful for what you and your team have done.”

Vader nodded in agreement. “Indeed,” he said. “You’ve given me a new lease on life, Doctor. There is no way I can thank you adequately.”

The doctor smiled, pleased by their praise. At this point the droid returned with a pitcher of cold water and a glass. It poured some of the water into the glass and handed it to Vader, who was only too happy to take it. The sensation of cold, refreshing water was more pleasing than he’d remembered, and he savored every drop.

“Thank you,” Vader said, handing the glass to the droid. “That was delicious.”

Leia giggled. “Daddy, it’s just water,” she said.

Luke frowned. “Leia, when you grow up on Tatooine it’s never *just water*,” he told her. ‘Right Dad?’

“Absolutely,” Vader agreed. “Life has a way of making one appreciate things,” he commented. “Living as half a person has made me realize just how precious life is,” he continued. “I know that I will never take anything for granted again.”

Padmé smiled, his words giving her hope that the changes in him were more than physical; that the darkness that had dwelled within the shattered body of Darth Vader had been eradicated in the rebirth of Anakin Skywalker.

“Lady Vader, it’s Solo. Do you read?”

Padmé activated her comlink, almost forgetting about the mission she’d sent Han on. “Yes, go ahead Han,” she said, walking away from the bed.

“We’re on our way to Kamino,” Han told her. “We should be there within twelve hours.”

Padmé looked over at Vader who was laughing with his children. “I’ll be ready,” she told him. “See you then.” She closed the transmission, telling herself that no matter how hard it would be, she must follow her course of action. *It’s for the best, Ani*, she told herself. *And some day you’ll see that too.*

Chapter 67

Sixty-seven

Kamino

“Feel better?” Padmé asked as the droid took Vader’s tray from him and left the room.

He smiled. “Absolutely,” he said. “I can’t tell you what a pleasure it is to eat real food again.”

Padmé smiled. “You’ll be able to do so many things again, Ani,” she said. “Just imagine.”

“Yeah Dad,” Luke said, “you can come swimming with us now!”

Vader laughed. “Well, that isn’t on the top of my list, but if it would make you happy, I’ll do it, Luke.”

“Are you up to walking, Dad?” Leia asked.

“Yes,” Vader replied, ‘absolutely.’ He swung his legs over the edge of the bed and looked down at his bare feet. “I never thought I’d be so happy to see my own toes,” he mused.

The twins laughed as each took a hand to help their father to his feet. Padmé walked around to the other side of the bed to watch. “You okay?” she asked him anxiously.

Vader looked up at her and nodded. “Yes, I’m fine,” he assured her. “Let me try it on my own, kids,” he said to Luke and Leia. Reluctantly they let go of his hands, and they and their mother watched anxiously as Vader took his tentative first steps.

Walking on real legs, without the almost constant pain his prosthetics had caused him, was more incredible than he remembered. Vader felt more alive than he had in ten years; and more powerful as well. Losing a significant part of his body mass had caused him to also lose much of the power that had made him the greatest Jedi ever. But now that power had returned, and it surged through his body as surely as the newly created veins and arteries through his new limbs. Padmé watched as the twins walked along side their father, ready to help him if he needed it. But he didn’t, and made it to the far side of the room unassisted.

“I did it!” Vader declared as he turned to Padmé. “Did you see that?”

Padmé nodded. “It’s wonderful,” she told him with a smile. “Just wonderful, Ani!”

Vader smiled broadly, the simple joy of being alive and whole again filling him. He looked at his wife, thinking of all the things he wanted to do to her as soon as he was able. He quickly pushed the thoughts from his mind before the twins sensed his feelings and started asking questions.

“Now remember, you mustn’t overdo it,” Padmé warned him, walking over to him.

“I know,” Vader said. ‘It’s just so wonderful to not have to wear that damnable suit any more,’ he told her, reaching out and taking her hands. “To be able to touch again, and see with

my own eyes,” he said. Vader said nothing more, but in his eyes Padmé could see the unspoken words he felt prudent to leave unsaid.

“Luke, Leia, why don’t you see if you can find one of the doctors?” Vader suggested, not taking his eyes from his wife. “I would like to know when I can leave.”

The twins had the distinct impression that their father was trying to get rid of them. Leia smiled, knowing why, and simply grabbed Luke, who remained clueless, by the arm. “Okay Daddy,” she said. “We’ll be right back.”

Luke yanked his arm from Leia’s grasp as they walked out the door.

“That was subtle,” Padmé quipped.

Vader laughed. “Well, I didn’t want them around when I did this,” he told her, bringing his hands to her face and drawing her closer. “And this,” he added, bending to her and kissing her.

“You smell wonderful,” he murmured as he nuzzled her earlobe.

Padmé smiled, loving how good it felt to feel his skin next to hers again.

“You know the kids are going to be back any moment now,” she reminded him.

“I’ll know when they’re coming,” he told her, kissing down the side of her neck next.

“Yes,” she agreed, “but maybe we should get you back into bed before things get out of hand.”

“Very well,” he sighed.

Padmé smiled as she escorted him back to the bed. “Seems your libido is as strong as ever,” she quipped.

“Well, that part of me was never damaged,” he reminded her.

“Yes I know,” she replied as he sat down on the edge of the bed. ‘Obi-Wan was here earlier,’ she told him, thinking it wise to change the subject. “I think you and he need to talk.”

The smile left Vader’s face. “I know,” he replied, moving back onto the bed. “He really came through for me when I needed him.”

Padmé nodded. “Yes he did,” she agreed. “If it weren’t for him, Palpatine would have killed you.”

Vader nodded. “No doubt of it,” he agreed. ‘What’s going on, Padmé?’ he asked her. “Now that Palpatine is dead? What’s happening to the Empire?”

Padmé didn’t know how to reply, but was saved from doing so by the entrance of a physician and the twins.

“I understand you’re getting restless, Lord Vader,” the doctor said with a smile.

“You could say so, yes,” Vader agreed. “When can I get out of here?”

The doctor laughed. “You’ve only woken up a few hours ago,” he reminded Vader. “I’d like you to remain here for at least another twenty-four hours.”

Vader frowned. "That long?" he asked.

Padmé smiled. "You'll have to excuse my husband, Doctor," she said. "He's never been a very good patient."

"He's an impatient patient," Leia said with a smile.

"Yes, I can see that," the physician replied. 'Nevertheless, I'd be remiss if I released you too soon. You can get up out of bed as you wish, however,' he added. "Perhaps you'd like to have a shower. The droids did their best to clean the bacta fluid off your skin, but I imagine you'd enjoy a nice shower."

Vader smiled. "Yes, I would," he replied, glancing at his wife.

"Fine then," the doctor replied. 'I'll return in a few hours to see how you're feeling. In the mean time, please try to be patient, Lord Vader. You've undergone a life altering medical procedure,' he said. "You mustn't push yourself too soon."

"I'll try," Vader replied.

"Thank you Doctor," Padmé said. "I'll make sure he doesn't push himself too hard."

The twins nodded in unison. "We'll all make sure," Luke piped up.

"I think you two need to get off to school," Padmé said. "You've already missed half a day. And don't you have a test today?"

The twins looked at their mother with wide eyes. "But... but Mom!" Luke protested.

"Your mother is absolutely right," Vader said. 'Wait a minute,' he said, looking back at Padmé. "School? How can they go to school here?"

"Distance education," Padmé replied. "Han set it all up."

Vader smiled, looking back at the twins. "Well, isn't that fantastic?" he said. 'Well if that's the case, then off you go,' he told them. "School's important."

"But Daddy," Leia whined.

"No buts," Vader said, reminding his twins again of his strictness. "You can come back later when your classes are finished."

"Okay," Luke replied dejectedly, feeling utterly betrayed. "Come on, Leia," he said.

Vader tried hard not to smile at their melodrama, but they were doing a fair bit of overacting and it wasn't easy. "Aren't you forgetting something?" he asked them as they started towards the door.

The twins looked back at him expectantly.

"Come here," he said.

The twins returned to their father's side, where he pulled each of them close and kissed them on the cheeks. "I love you both," he told them. "See you later."

Luke and Leia couldn't help but smile, being able to kiss and hug their father still a wondrous new joy to them both.

“See you later, Dad,” Luke said with a smile.

“We love you too,” Leia added.

Vader and Padmé watched as their children left the room. Once they’d left, Vader looked up at Padmé with a smile. “Pretty smooth, wouldn’t you say?” he asked, folding his arms behind his head.

Padmé shook her head with a smile. “Very smooth,” she replied. “You seemed very eager to get them out of here,” she said.

“I’m very eager to be alone with you,” he replied, reaching over and taking her hand.

“Ani, you heard what the doctor said,” she said as he pulled her onto the edge of his bed. “You shouldn’t push yourself.”

“How am I pushing myself?” he asked, running his hand up her arm. “I’m lying down,” he said with a smile.

Padmé laughed. “You are so bad,” she said, leaning closer to him. “What am I going to do with you?”

Vader’s smile grew. “You could help me take a shower,” he suggested. “You know, in case I...fall or something.”

Padmé laughed again. “Oh, is that why you need my help?”

Vader nodded. “Well, I’m a weak man, you see,” he said, pulling her closer to kiss her. “Very, very weak,” he said, as their mouths met.

Padmé was helpless to resist him, the power he’d always had over her as strong as ever. “Ani,” she sighed. “We shouldn’t, not here, not now,” she told him softly.

“Not here,” he told her. ‘Come with me,’ he said, releasing her and getting off the bed. He looked at her across the bed, seeing that she was feeling ambivalent. “Don’t worry,” he told her. “I’m fine. I’m better than fine. And I want you so much right now I can’t think straight.”

Padmé felt a rush of excitement just by the way he was looking at her. “I want you too,” she told him finally, unable to deny it any longer.

Vader smiled, and held his hand out to her. She put her hand in his and allowed him to lead her out of the room and into the adjoining fresher.

Chapter 68

Sixty-eight

Kamino

"I'm not sure how I'm going to explain why my hair is wet," Padmé said a little while later as she got dressed.

Vader smiled as he pulled on his sleep pants. "You're creative," he said. "I'm sure you'll think of something."

Padmé laughed. "Thanks," she said as she buttoned up her blouse. Vader watched her, trying to stifle a yawn. "I saw that," she told him.

Vader looked at her. "What?"

"That yawn," she told him, walking over to him. "Come on, you need some rest."

Vader didn't deny it, and merely allowed her to take his hand and lead him back to his bed.

"I think what we just did would qualify as pushing yourself," Padmé told him as he sat down on the edge of the bed.

"You think so?" he asked.

Padmé nodded. "Most definitely."

Vader shrugged. "Well, I've never been one to follow the rules, you know that."

"Oh yes, I certainly do," she replied. "But I really think you ought to get some rest now, Ani. Seriously."

Vader moved back onto the bed. "Very well," he yawned. "If you insist."

"I do," she said, pulling the blanket up over him. She looked up at him and smiled. "That was incredible, by the way," she said.

Vader smiled. "The first time or the second time?" he asked.

Padmé laughed. "Both," she said, bending down and kissing him lightly on the mouth. 'Now get some rest,' she told him. "So we can do that again."

"Now that's motivation," he quipped followed by another yawn. He closed his eyes, unable to deny the fatigue that was rapidly overtaking him. Padmé watched as he drifted off to sleep, a lump forming in her throat. When she was certain that he was asleep she gave him another kiss.

"Get your rest, Ani," she said softly. "And we'll see one another soon, I promise. I love you," she added, kissing him once more. And then she left him to sleep and make her own preparations for what lay ahead.

Sola had just set the table for supper when Padmé entered the apartment.

"How's Anakin?" Sola asked. "Luke and Leia told me that he was awake."

Padmé nodded. "He's doing very well," she replied with a smile. "He's sleeping now."

Sola noted how her sister's hair was wet, but decided not to ask her why.

"Obi-Wan is helping the twins with their homework," Sola told her.

"Han is due to arrive soon," Padmé told her sister as she helped her prepare a salad for dinner.

"You're not going to tell Anakin are you?" Sola asked.

Padmé was silent for a moment, doubts besieging her still. "If I do he will try to stop me," she said finally. "And I can't let him do that. I have to do this, Sola. If I don't, Bail Organa will make it impossible to stop him."

"I know," Sola replied. "And I know you're torn about leaving Anakin so soon after he's awoken. But I'm sure he'll be fine, Padmé."

"Yes, I know he will," Padmé replied. "I guess I just hate the thought of being parted from him even for a short time."

Sola smiled. "I hope he knows how lucky he is to have you," she said.

"I think he does," Padmé replied.

At this point Obi-Wan entered the room, followed by Luke and Leia.

"Something smells great," Luke said, sniffing the air. "Is dinner ready?"

"Just about," Sola replied. "Hungry, Luke?"

Luke smiled. "Oh yeah," he replied.

Leia rolled her eyes. "He's *always* hungry, Aunt Sola," she informed her aunt. "Nonstop, 24 hours a day. Or twenty six, depending on what planet he's on."

Luke made a face at her and then helped himself to some of the chopped vegetables his mother was putting in a bowl. "How's Dad?" he asked. "Can we go see him after supper?"

"He was sleeping when I left him," Padmé told her son. "But you can go and check on him if you like. I'm sure Obi-Wan would like to see him as well."

"What about you?" Leia asked her mother as they sat down to dinner.

"I expect that I'll be on my way to Coruscant by then," Padmé told her. "Han should be here soon."

"Dad's gonna be upset when he finds out you've gone, Mom," Luke told her.

"I know," Padmé replied. "But I have no choice, Luke. He'll understand that. You all have to help him to."

"Don't worry, Padmé," Obi-Wan said. "Anakin has a quick temper, but he usually sees reason. I'm sure he will understand your actions once he's cooled down enough to listen to an

explanation of them.”

“He’ll want to follow you, Padmé,” Sola put in. “Have you anticipated that?”

“Yes, I know he will,” Padmé replied. “I can’t prevent that, Sola. But hopefully I will have set things right by the time he gets there. That’s my hope. That’s what I’m counting on.”

The Death Star

Tarkin looked up from his dinner as General Tagge slid into the chair across from him. “Well?” he asked simply.

Tarkin’s brows lowered, giving Tagge his answer.

“Organa’s a stubborn man,” Tagge commented. “And not easily intimidated.”

“He’s a fool if he thinks I’m bluffing,” Tarkin snapped. “Perhaps we need to give him a little demonstration of this station’s power, Cassio.”

It was Tagge’s turn to frown. “What do you mean?”

“Well, think of it, Cassio,” Tarkin replied. “The Death Star is the greatest kept secret the galaxy has ever known. The Senate may be in charge, but they are clueless.”

Tagge nodded as he began to understand. “So perhaps that’s why Organa doesn’t feel threatened,” he replied. “He doesn’t know what we’re capable of.”

Tarkin smiled. “Exactly my point, my dear chap,” he said. “But if we show him what we’re capable of, he won’t be so quick to dismiss our threats.”

“Yes, true,” Tagge replied. “And how do you propose we do that?”

“There’s only one way,” Tarkin replied. “You know that, Cassio.”

Tagge frowned, not liking where this was heading. The thought of actually destroying a planet was very disturbing to him. He had always believed the Death Star would be used to strike fear into the hearts of the Empire’s less than cooperative citizens. But to actually use it this way...

“Yes, I suppose you’re right,” Tagge said at last. ‘I have to say, though,’ he added. “I don’t relish the thought of destroying an entire world, Tarkin.”

Tarkin frowned. “I always suspected you were soft, Tagge,” he said coldly. “But rest assured, if you don’t have the stomach for your position here, I can replace you in a heartbeat.”

Tagge nodded in understanding, starting to believe that the power of being in command of the mighty space station had turned Tarkin mad. “Your shuttle is prepared,” he told Tarkin, changing the subject. “The forty-eight hours are almost up.”

“Very well,” Tarkin replied, standing up. “Time to pay a visit to the Senate.”

Kamino

Luke and Leia returned to the apartment shortly after they’d left, their disappointment clear on their faces.

"Dad was still sleeping," Luke told Sola and Obi-Wan. "Guess we'll have to wait until morning."

"I'm sorry," Obi-Wan said. "I know how much you were looking forward to seeing him."

"Where's Mom?" Leia asked.

"She's packing a bag," Sola told them. "Han Solo signalled a little while ago. He'll be here within the hour."

"I don't like keeping this from Dad," Luke said. "Besides, he'll know before long anyway. And then he'll be mad at us for not telling him."

"I don't like the idea of your mother going to the Senate alone," Obi-Wan said. "And when your father learns of her plans, wild rancors won't be able to keep him here."

"I'm not going alone," Padmé said, entering the room. "Han will be with me, as well as Captain Piett, and an entire squadron of clones."

Obi-Wan looked up at her. "Han nor Captain Piett are Jedi Knights, Padmé," he remarked.

Padmé lifted an eyebrow. "If that's your subtle way of asking me if you can come, the answer is no," she said. "I need you here to keep Anakin here as long as possible. You know him, Obi-Wan. He won't listen to doctors. You need to keep the fact that I'm gone hidden from him until he's well enough to leave Kamino."

"I will do my best, Padmé," Obi-Wan replied. "But you know as well as I do that Anakin is very protective of you. It won't be easy."

"And besides that," Leia added. "Dad can feel you, Mom. He knows when you're home and when you're not. He can sense you so clearly that...I just don't know how we're going to keep him from knowing. I'm not sure we can."

Padmé sighed, realizing that Leia was more than likely right. "In that case, the best I can hope for is a good head start. Your father is still asleep?"

The twins nodded.

"Well hopefully Han will arrive soon so I can get underway," Padmé replied.

As if on cue, Padmé's comlink sounded. She activated it at once, and the voice of Han Solo issued forth.

"We just established orbit, Milady," Han told her. "I'm on my way down to the planet. Do you still want to do this?"

Padmé looked up at Obi-Wan. "Yes Han," she said. "I do."

Obi-Wan looked away, unable to hide his uneasiness from her.

"I'll be there in twenty minutes," Han told her. "Solo out."

"Well, looks like you'll get that head start you hoped for," Sola said.

Padmé nodded. She looked over at the twins, who looked dejected and worried. Sitting down on the sofa, she held her hands out to them. At once Luke and Leia sat down with her.

"I don't want you two to worry," she told them. "Everything is going to be fine."

"When are we going to see you again, Mom?" Leia asked, fighting her tears.

"Soon, I promise," Padmé replied. 'What I'm doing has to be done,' she told them. "For the good of the Empire, for the good of the galaxy. You both understand that, don't you?"

"We understand," Luke assured her. "But that doesn't mean we like it."

Padmé smiled. *You're so much like your father it's frightening*, she thought.

The door chime sounded. "That will be Han," Padmé said, standing up.

"I'll get your bag," Obi-Wan offered.

"Thank you, Obi-Wan," she said. She activated the door and it opened to reveal Han Solo and an imperial officer. "Please come in, gentlemen," she said.

"Lady Vader, this is Captain Piett of the star destroyer *Exactor*," Han said as they stepped into the apartment.

"It is an honour to meet you at last, Lady Vader," Piett said with a bow.

"I appreciate what you're doing for me, Captain," Padmé replied. "I assume Han has filled you in on what's been happening here."

"Yes, Milady," Piett replied. "How is Lord Vader? Is he still in stasis?"

"No he woke up early this morning," Padmé told them. "And is doing very well," she added with a smile.

"That's great news," Han said. 'You must be so relieved.'

Padmé nodded. "Yes, we all are," she said. She looked back at the twins. "I guess we'd best be off," she said. The twins came to her and the three of them hugged one another tightly. Padmé willed herself not to cry over leaving her children, and kissed them each. "We'll see one another very soon," she told them softly. "I promise."

"Don't worry, Padmé," Sola told her. "I'll take good care of Luke and Leia."

"As will I," Obi-Wan added, setting her bag down.

Padmé nodded. "I know you will," she said. 'Thank you both.' She hugged her sister next, and then turned to Obi-Wan. "Look after Anakin for me too," she said. "Just as you used to look after him for me."

Obi-Wan nodded. "I will," he told her. "You have my word."

Padmé smiled. "Thank you," she said softly. She turned to Han and Piett next. "Time to go," she said.

Han picked up her bag and the two men stepped aside, letting her leave the apartment first, and then followed her out the door.

"She's going to be okay, right Obi-Wan?" Luke asked.

Obi-Wan's eyes remained on the closed door where Padmé had just exited. "I certainly hope so, young one," he said. "I certainly hope so."

Chapter 69

Sixty-nine

Vader awoke the next morning feeling well rested. He stretched his arms above his head, the feeling of having had a good night sleep putting him in a happy frame of mind. Getting out of bed, he headed to the fresher. He smiled as he thought back to the previous day. Making love to his wife when he was still in the suit had been more than he'd ever imagined possible; but to make love to her without it... that was truly a miracle. And soon he would be able to spend the night with her in his arms and wake her up with a shower of kisses as he always loved to do. He smiled as his mind started to drift, imagining her as she slept. And then he frowned: *Padmé isn't here... I don't feel her... she's not on Kamino... she's gone....*

Vader was just stepping out of the fresher when his children entered his room. He tried to smile as he returned the warm embraces they showered him with.

"How are you feeling, Daddy?" Leia asked as Vader sat down on the edge of his bed.

"Good, really good," he told her. "Where's your Mom?" he asked.

"She's with Aunt Sola," Luke replied. "She kinda felt bad that Aunt Sola has been alone so much lately that she decided to stay with her."

Vader looked at his son, knowing that he was lying.

"I don't believe you," Vader said, looking from Luke to Leia. "Where is she?"

The twins looked at one another, alarmed by their father's ability to read their minds.

"What makes you think we're lying?" Leia asked, doing her best to deflect her father's attention from the subject of her mother.

Vader frowned. "Don't play games with me," he replied. "I know she's not on this planet and I want to know why. Now."

"I'll tell you, Anakin."

Vader and his children turned to where Obi-Wan had entered the room. "But you're not going to like it."

Vader watched Obi-Wan as he walked across the room. "What the hell is going on, Kenobi?" he demanded. "Where is my wife?"

Obi-Wan sighed. "Sit down, Anakin," he said. "There's a lot you need to know."

Reluctantly Vader sat down on the edge of the bed, his frown deepening. He said nothing, and merely waited for Obi-Wan to begin.

"I'm not even sure where to start," Obi-Wan began.

"You can begin by telling me where my wife is," Vader said. "And why you let her leave."

“Padmé has gone to the capital,” Obi-Wan began. “She means to address the Senate.”

Vader could feel the anger surging through him. “The Senate?? Why? What the devil is going on?”

“She saw Viceroy Organa on the news, Dad,” Luke said. “That’s when it all started.”

“Why was he on the news?” Vader demanded.

“He was having a press conference,” Leia told him. “He’s been released from jail.”

Vader jumped off the bed at this bed. “What!?” he cried. “How the hell did *that* happen??”

“The Senate released him,” Obi-Wan explained.

“And who gave them the authority to do such a thing?” Vader demanded angrily.

“Padmé did,” Obi-Wan replied. “That’s who.”

Coruscant

The *Exactor* entered orbit around the capital early the next morning. Padmé had spent a restless night, her anxieties preventing her from sleeping more than a few scant hours. She missed the twins and Anakin terribly, and tried not to imagine how angry her husband would be when he found out what she had done. *But I’m doing it for him*, she kept telling herself; *he will understand that once he has the whole picture*.

Padmé looked up when she heard the door chime. “Come in,” she called.

Han Solo entered the room. He smiled when he saw how Padmé had dressed for the occasion: all in black, just like her infamous spouse. “We’ve just established orbit,” he told her. “Are you ready?”

Padmé stood up. “Yes,” she said. “Let’s go before I lose my nerve.”

Han grinned. “Now *that* I’d like to see,” he quipped. ‘Captain Piett is meeting us in the hangar bay,’ he told her. “Along with Captain Rex and his squadron.”

Padmé nodded. “Good,” she said. “Let’s hope we won’t need his services,” she added anxiously.

“Of course,” he replied. “But he’s the best there is, Milady. Rest assured, he will keep order should there be a need to do so.”

Padmé hoped fervently that there wouldn’t be. She hated violence, always had. But she also knew that she needed to take strong action in order to re-establish her husband’s authority in the Empire. She had been considering what action this would be, and felt certain that what she had in mind would no doubt create a great deal of controversy. *Perhaps we’ll need Rex after all*, she thought grimly.

“Good morning, Lady Vader,” Piett greeted her as she and Han entered the hangar bay. Commander Rex stood beside him, holding his mask under one arm. “I hope you had a restful night.”

“Not at all, Captain,” Padmé replied, smiling grimly. “But that’s not important right now. What’s important is getting the Senate to listen to what I have to say.”

“Oh I’m quite sure we can promise you they’ll listen, Milady,” Rex spoke up with a smile. “Rest assured.”

“Shall we be off, then?” Piett suggested.

Padmé nodded, and then walked past the three men to the ramp and up into the shuttle. Han, Rex and Piett followed behind her, all three equally impressed by her courage and determination.

Kamino

Vader stared at Obi-Wan in disbelief. He felt angry, confused and betrayed all at once. “Padmé enabled the Senate to release him?” he asked incredulously. “*Padmé??*”

“It’s not what you think, Dad,” Luke spoke up. “She was as upset about his release as you are.”

Vader looked at his son. “Perhaps someone should explain this to me,” he said. “Because it makes no sense whatsoever. If she didn’t want the Senate to release Organa, why did she give them leave to do so?”

“She didn’t,” Obi-Wan replied. “At least, not directly. You must understand what has been going on while you’ve been in stasis, Anakin. When Palpatine was killed, the Empire was thrown into an upheaval. Rumours were flying about; no one knew what was going on. Padmé knew that if she didn’t step in and take some measure of control that things would soon spiral out of control. So she called a press conference, in which she gave the Senate temporary control of the Empire. She also told the Empire that you had been injured defending Palpatine. She knew that if the truth were revealed you would be in danger, and that your right to succession jeopardized. She told the press that two assassins had infiltrated Palpatine’s office and that they had killed him. You had tried to save him, but were injured in the process, but not before killing both of the intruders. The press believed her. Unfortunately they were rather relentless with their questioning, and it turned out to be a very upsetting ordeal for her.”

Vader scowled. “What do you mean?” he demanded. “What did they ask her?”

“They asked if you died if she would become empress,” Luke told him. “Mom was already really scared about losing you, and this just made her worry even more.”

“It was because of that press conference that she lost the baby, Dad,” Leia told him. “It was too much for her and she collapsed after it was over.”

Vader felt sickened by this information, and commenced pacing about in the room, the anger he felt surging through him. “I’ll make sure they pay for that,” he said quietly. “So she gave the Senate control of the Empire, is that what you’re telling me?”

“Yes,” Obi-Wan replied. ‘It was a sound political move,’ he added. “Someone needed to be in charge, and it was better them than some overly ambitious governor with delusions of greatness. You know yourself how many of those there are around.”

Vader nodded. Obi-Wan was right; what Padmé had done was the best course of action she could have taken. “So it looks like the senate took advantage of the power she gave them,” he decided. “And took it upon themselves to free Organa.”

“Exactly,” Obi-Wan replied. “And she has gone to the Senate to put things right.”

“How?” Vader asked.

“By force, if necessary,” Obi-Wan told him. “She took Han Solo with her as well as your star destroyer. I’m sure they will listen to her with a squadron of clones backing her up.”

Vader couldn’t help but smile as he thought of her boldness. “She really is something,” he muttered, shaking his head. ‘But I’m not about to let her take on the Imperial Senate on her own,’ he was quick to add. He looked at the twins. “I want the two of you to find me some clothes,” he said. “I’m going to Coruscant.” He turned to Obi-Wan. “And you’re coming with me.”

Coruscant

The Imperial Senate had almost concluded the morning session when an unexpected VIP entered their midst. Bail Organa, who was convening the meeting, stopped in mid-sentence as a pod containing Padmé Amidala came into view. It wasn’t long before the other senators saw her and a great deal of discussion ensued as each one tried to determine her purpose for being here.

Organa was unnerved by her presence, and looked over at his ally, Mon Mothma, in the hopes of some sort of explanation. Mothma merely shrugged, and looked to Padmé, waiting for her to address the Senate.

“Senator Amidala,” he said, not quite sure how to address her. “This is a most unexpected pleasure. We are honoured by your presence.”

Padmé’s face was inscrutable as she nodded in response to his greeting, and Organa felt the hair on the back of his neck standing on end as he recalled the words of Mon Mothma. *Don’t get too comfortable.*

“Please continued, Senator Organa,” Padmé said finally, enjoying his obvious discomfiture. “I wouldn’t want to get in the way of the democratic process.”

Her words surprised Organa, and he looked away, doing his best to remain composed. But it was not easy to do with Padmé watching him.

“Democratic process,” Organa repeated with a smile. ‘Do you hear that, my friends? Too long has democracy been absent from this noble assembly. For ten years our galaxy has been the killing fields of Palpatine and his sinister collaborators. But no more. And so, my fellow senators, this concludes our session for this morning,’ Organa said. “Unless there is any further business, we shall reconvene in two days time.”

“I want to know what Senator Amidala is doing here,” one senator shouted out, to which many more responded in agreement.

“Yes, Senator Amidala,” Mon Mothma spoke up, moving her pod closer to the one Padmé occupied. “We’d all like to know to what we owe the pleasure of your company,” she said. Padmé faced the woman, resenting the underlying tone of bitterness that her words held.

“I’m not here as Senator Amidala,” Padmé said at last, creating a rippled of murmurs throughout the assemblage. ‘I’m here as Lady Vader,’ she continued. “Wife of Darth Vader, the new ruler of the Empire.”

At first her words were met with shocked silence, but then there was a great uproar amidst the members of the senate. Padmé was expecting this, and activated her comlink. At once a sea of white armoured clone troopers surged into the rotunda, filling the floor at the bottom of the arena within seconds.

The assembled senators were outraged by the invasion, and shouted their protests as the clones fixed their weapons upon the assembly.

“What is the meaning of this?” Organa shouted, finally finding his voice. “How dare you invade the sanctity of this assembly?”

“We’re under orders Senator,” Rex spoke up.

“Orders? I give the orders around here, Commander,” Organa snapped back.

“Not any more.”

Organa turned to Padmé, noting that a second pod containing two imperial officers now flanked hers. “I am assuming control of this assembly and of the Empire,” she announced. “Until such time as my husband, the new emperor, is able to rule. Any objections?” she asked, looking around. The senators were too shocked to respond, and too intimidated by the clone troopers to even think of doing so.

“Very good,” Padmé said. “This meeting is adjourned. Senator Organa, a word with you in private if you please.”

Han moved the pod he and Pielt stood in over to the pod where Organa stood with mouth agape. “This way, Senator,” Han said, placing his hand on his blaster. Organa nodded and complied, knowing he had no choice but to do so.

The hall emptied quickly, the senators more than anxious to get away from the menacing presence of the clones. They spoke amongst themselves as they did so, all quite shocked by the turn of events they had just witnessed.

Organa, who felt humiliated by what had happened, met Padmé in the office once occupied by Palpatine.

“What is the meaning of this, Padmé?” he demanded, ignoring the officers who stood by Padmé’s side. “You put the Senate in charge of the Empire, and now you’re going to take that power away from us? Why?”

“You’re why, Bail,” she replied calmly. “And you’re the main reason I’m here,” she added. She turned to Han, who stepped forward, followed by two clones.

“Viceroy Organa,” Han began. “You’re under arrest for the crime of high treason against the Galactic Empire.”

Organa’s eyes widened in shock, and then he turned to Padmé.

“I don’t believe you have the authority to arrest anyone, Lady Vader,” Organa replied stiffly.

Padmé smiled. “Of course I do,” she said. “I’m the wife of the new emperor, Senator. I suppose that makes me Empress, doesn’t it? And as empress, I can arrest whomever I please.”

Commander Rex moved forward with another clone to take Organa into custody.

“This is an outrage!” Organa shouted as they began to lead him away. “You can’t arrest me! I’m an Imperial Senator! I have rights!”

But his protests were ignored as the clones lead him away.

“So far so good, Milady,” Han said. “You shouldn’t have any more trouble from him.”

Padmé nodded. “Let’s hope so, Han,” she replied. “Still, I can’t help but feel like we’re not out of this yet.”

“How interesting that you would feel that way, Lady Vader.”

Padmé, Han and Piett all turned to see a figure standing in the doorway, a sinister smile on his face.

“Allow me to introduce myself, Milady,” he said, stepping into the room. “My name is Wilhuff Tarkin.”

Chapter 70

Seventy

Kamino

"Dad, we want to come with you too," Luke said.

Vader shook his head. "No," he replied at once. "You two are *not* getting involved in this," he stated emphatically.

"But we want to go home, Daddy," Leia put in. "Can't we come back to Coruscant with you? Aunt Sola can stay with us. I don't want to stay here without you or Mom."

"Neither do I," Luke added.

Vader looked at each of the twins and then nodded. "Yes, that's acceptable," he said. "I suppose you'd only get into mischief if I left you here," he added with the slightest hint of a smile. The twins smiled too.

"Oh you know it," Luke told his father.

"Yes, I certainly do," Vader replied. He looked over at Obi-Wan. "Do we have transportation?" he asked.

"We have the shuttle Padmé and I brought you here in," Obi-Wan replied. "But there is a more immediate problem that you need to address before we worry about that, Anakin," he said.

Vader frowned. "What?" he asked.

Obi-Wan pointed to the sleep pants that Vader wore. "You're not really going to enter the Senate chamber in your pyjamas, are you?" he asked. Luke and Leia giggled.

"Don't worry, Dad," Luke assured his father. "We're on it."

"Good," Vader replied. "Somehow I don't think my entrance would be quite as effective if I walked in like this," he quipped.

The twins giggled again and then left the room, both of them wondering where they were going to find clothes for their father.

"Padmé is doing what she thinks is best, Anakin," Obi-Wan reminded him.

"I know she is," Vader replied. "But she doesn't understand the Empire, Obi-Wan. She is thinking like a Republican Senator, and things don't work the way they did when she held office. There are plenty of nefarious characters lurking about who think only of their own best interest and care nothing for anyone or anything else."

His words surprised Obi-Wan. "Do I take it you've become disenchanted with the Empire?" he asked.

"You could say so," Vader replied. 'It was never what I had envisioned,' he admitted. "Palpatine had his own vision, something entirely different from mine. And like a fool I helped him realize that vision."

Obi-Wan nodded, watching his former pupil with interest. "You sound quite remorseful, Anakin," he commented.

Vader made no reply, for he himself wasn't certain how to respond. "I should have listened to you, Obi-Wan," he admitted finally. "You tried to warn me about Palpatine, but I wouldn't listen. And I ended up destroying everything I cared about as a result."

"It's not too late to make amends for that," Obi-Wan told him. "Destroying Palpatine was the first step. Destroying the Empire he created is the next one."

Their conversation was interrupted by the return of the twins accompanied by their Aunt Sola.

"Hello Sola," Vader said, giving her a smile. "It's good to see you."

Sola nodded, utterly shocked by the sight of a fully restored Anakin Skywalker. "And you," she said at last. "You look fantastic," she told him with a smile.

"I feel fantastic," Vader replied.

"Padmé ordered these for you when you were still in stasis," Sola said, holding up a package. "She figured you'd need them at some point," she added with a smile.

"She thinks of everything," Vader replied, taking the package from her. "Thank you. Sola I need your help for something else. Will you come to Coruscant with us? I want to leave as soon as possible."

"The twins told me everything," she replied. "And I'd be happy to help. Just tell me what you need from me, Anakin."

Coruscant

Padmé did her best to remain calm, and assumed her most effective political smile. "Governor Tarkin," she said. "What a surprise."

Tarkin returned her smile. "Lady Vader," he replied, his eyes looking her over rather appraisingly. "A pleasure to meet you at last. I see now that your beauty far exceeded its reputation," he added.

Padmé lifted an eyebrow. "Is that so?" she replied. "I wasn't aware that it had a reputation."

Tarkin laughed mechanically. "Well, when a woman's beauty is as spectacular as yours, its reputation is earned."

"Why don't you tell us why you're here, Governor?" Piett spoke up. "I'm sure you haven't come all this way to pay compliments to Lady Vader."

Tarkin's smile faded as he fixed a withering look upon the captain. "Yes, of course," he replied. "Lady Vader, a word with you in private, if you please," he said.

"I don't think so," Han spoke up. "We go wherever she goes."

Tarkin looked at Han with a scowl. "Need I remind you, Commander, that I outrank you?" he said. "And you?" he added, looking at Piett next.

"But not me," Padmé spoke up. "And I insist upon their presence."

Tarkin looked at her, his affability wearing thin. "Very well," he said tersely. "Shall we?" he asked, indicating the door to the former chancellor's office.

Padmé glanced up at Han, and then walked into the office with Tarkin. Piett and Han followed them closely, not leaving Tarkin alone with Padmé for a moment.

"Let's sit down, shall we?" Tarkin suggested.

Padmé took a seat, arranging the skirt of her gown around her carefully as she gathered her nerve. She would need it to get through this impromptu meeting.

"I understand you had Viceroy Organa arrested, Milady," Tarkin began.

"How do you know that?" Han asked. "It only happened a few minutes ago."

Tarkin looked up at Han with a withering look. "If you insist up on being here, the least you can do is keep your mouth shut, Commander," he said.

Han opened his mouth to respond, but was stopped by Piett's elbow.

"Commander Solo raises an interesting question, Governor," Padmé said. "How did you know? Were you spying on us?"

"Spying? Of course not," Tarkin replied. 'I happened to be...nearby when it happened,' he said. "But I was not spying, Milady."

Padmé didn't believe him for a moment. "Whether you were or not, I fail to see why it matters to you that he was arrested," she said.

"Because Organa is a trouble maker," Tarkin replied. "And a dissident. Having him out of the way makes things much easier."

Padmé frowned. "Easier in what way?" she asked.

"Easier to make the changes necessary to stabilize the Empire," Tarkin replied.

"And together, Lady Vader, you and I can ensure that happens."

Padmé was surprised by his comment. "And how can we do that, Governor?" she asked.

Tarkin smiled. "Shall we speak plainly, Milady?" he said. "I have something you need, you have something I need. Together we can establish an Imperial rule that will be contested by no one, not even the Rebel Alliance."

Padmé stared at him, quite taken aback by his statement. "I'm afraid I don't fully understand what it is you're proposing, Governor," she said. "My husband is the successor of the late emperor. How could he possibly need you or anything you offer?"

Tarkin's smile faded. "I am the commander of the Death Star, Lady Vader," he told her. "I estimate that gives me some....leverage."

Piett and Han exchanged a look of concern upon hearing this, both realizing exactly what he meant by this remark.

“Let me see if I understand this, Governor,” Padmé said. “You are offering the Death Star in exchange for... what exactly?”

“The support of the clones,” Piett replied readily. “The support of the emperor. The way I see it, Vader needs me, if you’ll allow me to say so. The Death Star was the late emperor’s greatest vision. He knew it would be the key to holding a firm grip on the control of the Empire. And I’m sure Vader sees that too.”

Padmé knew very little about the Death Star, but realized she couldn’t let Tarkin know this. She suddenly found herself wishing that she’d waited for her husband to accompany her; he would know what to do right about now. “You presume a great deal, Governor,” she said at last. “I don’t believe there’s anyone who can speak for Darth Vader, not even me.”

Her words surprised Tarkin for a moment, And then he remembered what he’d heard about the relationship between Vader and his wife. Some of the officers on board the Death Star, namely General Motti, had been at the party held by the emperor and had reported that the Dark Lord’s marriage to Senator Amidala was a farce. It had been quite clear to everyone present that she could barely stand to be in Vader’s presence. Tarkin smiled as an idea came to mind.

“Lord Vader is not an easy man to deal with,” he said carefully. “I’m sure you have discovered that yourself, Milady.”

Padmé said nothing in response, neither confirming nor denying what he’d said.

“I somehow can’t quite imagine a woman such as you being married to a man like him, if you’ll forgive me for saying so,” Tarkin continued.

“And why is that?” Padmé replied, deciding to lead him on just a wee bit more.

Tarkin smiled. “Need I say it plainly?” he asked. “You’re a beautiful, vibrant woman, and he’s... well... he’s little more than a droid,” he said.

Padmé fought back the urge to smile at his ignorance and simply looked down at the hands in her lap. “That is hardly relevant to our discussion, Governor,” she said quietly.

Piett and Han exchanged a look of amusement, both of them seeing where Padmé was going.

Tarkin, of course, was unaware of their exchange and smiled. “Perhaps it is more relevant than you realize, Milady,” he replied, leaning closer and looking at her with undisguised hunger.

Padmé felt a shudder go up her spine and looked at him coldly. “Mind yourself Governor,” she warned him. “I’m an empress now, remember?”

Tarkin sat back, the smile leaving his face. “What do you say to my proposal?” he asked, assuming a more business-like attitude.

Padmé remained silent, her mind working feverishly. “I need some time to think about it,” she said finally. “This is all rather unexpected, Governor.”

Tarkin relaxed, seeing that she was at least considering his idea. "Of course," he replied. "Is twenty four hours enough?" he asked.

Padmé looked over Tarkin's shoulder to Han, who was shaking his head.

"Make it forty-eight hours," she said, looking back at Tarkin.

Tarkin pressed his lips together into a tight line, his displeasure evident. "Very well," he said, knowing he had no option but to concede to her terms.

"I will contact you in forty-eight hours," Padmé told him.

"Perhaps you'd like a tour of the Death Star, Milady?" Tarkin suggested, "in the meantime. It may help you reach a decision."

Padmé nodded. "I'm sure it would," she replied. "Why don't I meet you there? Perhaps tomorrow some time?"

"Perfect," Tarkin replied, the self-satisfied smile returning to his face.

"We'll need the coordinates, of course," Piett spoke up.

"Of course," Tarkin agreed. "I'll relay them to your ship as soon as I return," he told Piett.

"Good, then it's settled," Padmé said, standing up. Tarkin joined her at once.

"Until tomorrow, Milady," Tarkin said, giving her a small bow.

Padmé nodded, and then watched him leave. Once he was out of earshot, Han spoke up.

"You're not really going to the Death Star, are you?" Han asked her. "He's baiting you, Milady."

"Of course he is," Padmé replied. "What Tarkin doesn't know is that I won't be alone when I pay him a visit." She smiled. "I can't wait to see the look on his face when Anakin Skywalker shows up on his doorstep."

Piett and Han both smiled, sensing that Tarkin had vastly underestimated the new empress.

Imperial Shuttle— en route to Coruscant

The voyage to Coruscant was taking far longer than Vader wanted, and he was beginning to grow restless. The twins had sensed this, and had talked to their father about everything they could think of to take his mind off of his worry.

"So how was school earlier?" he asked them, glancing at his brand new wrist chrono.

"Torture," Luke grumbled.

Vader smiled. "That bad?"

"Uh huh," Luke replied. "Dad, we had to write poetry today. *Poetry!!* That's so... girly!"

Vader laughed out loud at this point.

"Ready for some dinner, everyone?" Sola asked, bringing a tray of synthesized food into the passenger hold.

“More than ready,” Vader replied. “Thank you.”

“Well, it’s not home made,” she told him as he helped her with the tray. “But it’s better than nothing.”

“You should taste the roast Aunt Sola made last night,” Leia told her father. “She’s an amazing cook.”

Sola smiled.

“Is she?” Vader asked.

Luke nodded. “Yeah, almost as good as Mom.”

Vader’s eyebrows lifted and looked at Sola, embarrassed by his son’s comment. “Your mother can cook?”

The twins looked at one another.

“Yeah, of course she can,” Leia replied. “Why does that surprise you?”

“Well, she didn’t do much cooking,” he replied. “And when she did....well, it wasn’t good.”

“She must have had lessons or something,” Luke suggested. ‘Just wait until you get to eat her cooking, Dad,’ he added with a smile. “She’s the best.”

Vader nodded. “I look forward to it,” he said.

“We’ve entered the Coruscant System, sir,” a clone announced as he stepped into the lounge.

“Good,” Vader replied. “Let’s just hope we’re not too late,” he said quietly.

Chapter 71

Seventy-one

Coruscant

Padmé, Han and Pielt had almost made it to the exit when Padmé heard someone calling her name. She turned to see Mon Mothma coming towards her.

She could tell at once how upset Mothma was, and wasn't terribly surprised.

"Padmé, a word with you please," Mothma said.

"Lady Vader doesn't have time for that right now," Han interjected.

"It's okay, Han," Padmé told him. "I'm sure she has a few questions."

"I most certainly do," Mothma replied. "Starting with what gives you the right to arrest Bail Organa?"

Padmé folded her arms over her chest. "You were out of line to have him released in the first place," she replied. "I was merely righting that wrong."

Mothma shook her head ruefully. "Padmé, what's wrong with you? I can't believe you're siding with the Empire! You of all people! You were one of the greatest champions of democracy. You yourself went to Palpatine as a representative of the Delegation of 2000. And yet now you are standing up for the very principles that you fought so ferociously against! I can't believe you're the same woman!"

Padmé looked at her for a moment before replying, wondering how much she ought to tell her. "If you knew me as well as you claim to, you'd know I would never count myself as an Imperial sympathizer. There is far more to this situation than you know, Mon. Far more."

Mothma frowned. "Care to enlighten me?" she asked sarcastically.

"I might," Padmé replied. 'If I thought I could trust you. But I don't,' she said bluntly. "And there's far too much on the line right now for me to take chances." She looked up at Han, who was watching the exchange with admiration. "Let's go," she said.

Han nodded, and, after a final backwards glance at Mothma, escorted Padmé to the lift. Mothma watched them go, anger and frustration making her clench her fists tightly.

"You handled her very well," Pielt commented as they rode the lift to the hangar bay. "If you don't mind me saying so."

Padmé smiled grimly. "She had a lot of nerve questioning my loyalty," she replied.

"Why didn't you tell her what really happened?" Han asked her. "If she knew that Lord Vader had killed Palpatine she wouldn't be so ugly."

"I was tempted to, believe me," Padmé replied. "But I'm not sure yet what Anakin wants the Senate to know. Besides, I don't trust her. I'm sure that she was behind Organa's release,

and that makes her my enemy.”

“I think it’s wise of you to remain guarded where the Senate is concerned, Milady,” Piett remarked. “There are Rebel sympathizers among their ranks, after all. Viceroy Organa is a prime example.”

“Exactly,” Padmé replied. ‘Perhaps we ought to return to the *Exactor*, Captain,’ she said. “I have a feeling the media will be sniffing around my home about now.”

“No doubt of that,” Piett replied.

At this moment Padmé’s comlink sounded. She knew even before she activated it who it was.

“Hello Anakin,” she said. “I’m fine.”

“Where are you Padmé?” came his reply. Padmé could hear the worry in his voice.

“I’m just entering the hangar bay at the Senate,” she told him. “We’re returning to the *Exactor*. Where are you?”

“Just coming up on Coruscant,” Vader replied. “I’ll meet you on board. You have some explaining to do,” he couldn’t resist adding.

Padmé merely smiled. “I’ll see you soon,” she told him. She looked up at Han and Piett. “Sounds like he’s back to his old self again,” she remarked. Both men smiled in agreement.

Star Destroyer Exactor

“Sir, we’re getting a message coming through,” the young communications officer told the lieutenant who was in temporary command of the *Exactor*. “It’s Captain Piett, sir,” the man reported.

The lieutenant frowned. “Are you sure?” he asked.

“He gave his security clearance code, sir,” the young man replied.

The lieutenant nodded. “Very well,” he replied. “Drop the shields and open the hangar doors. Bring him in.”

“Yes sir.”

No sooner had the shuttle been brought on board when the communications officer received another message coming through. “Sir, Lord Vader is now signalling,” the confused officer reported.

The lieutenant walked over to the communication station, quite certain that the young officer was mistaken. “Lord Vader is on Kamino,” he reminded the young man tersely. “Don’t you remember the briefing with Captain Piett? The one where Lady Vader was present?”

“Yes sir,” the man replied. ‘But this is his code, sir,’ he explained. “Should I open a channel?”

“There’s no need,” Captain Piett said as he appeared on the bridge. “It is Lord Vader. Bring his shuttle on board.”

Both officers looked up and nodded, relieved that their commander was there to sort things out.

"I thought Lord Vader was recuperating on Kamino, sir," the lieutenant asked Piett.

Piett smiled in response. "Lord Vader is fully recovered and ready to return to duty," he informed his bridge crew. "But I must forewarn you all; he is not the man you remember."

The crewmen looked at one another in surprise, wondering what Piett could possibly mean.

Padmé and Han had been escorted to a briefing room where they were waiting for Vader to arrive, knowing that he was close behind them. Padmé paced up and down in the room, her anxiety growing with each moment she was forced to wait.

Han knew why she was anxious, but he also knew it wasn't his place to offer reassurances. As close as he felt to her, to the entire Vader family, he had to keep reminding himself that he was not a part of it, as much as he wanted to be. He himself had never had a family to speak of, having been on his own since a very young age. Han found himself envying the closeness that he saw between them all, for he had never had anything like it in his own life. And yet, even though he was not their kin, Han knew that he would risk his life to save any one of them. He'd joined the Imperial Navy because he needed something to do with his life and he loved to fly. But now he'd found his niche: to serve this remarkable family in any way he could.

The door to the conference room opened and Padmé looked over expectantly, only to see Piett enter the room.

"Lord Vader's shuttle has just been brought on board, Milady," he informed Padmé.

Padmé nodded in understanding. "Does he know we're already on board?" she asked.

"Yes Milady," Piett replied. "I've instructed the clones in the hangar to direct him here."

No sooner had the words left Piett's mouth when the door opened. Padmé looked over as Luke and Leia ran into the room.

"Mom!" they shouted as they each gave her a hug.

"I missed you both," she told them, returning their embrace. She looked up as Sola entered the room with Obi-Wan close behind. And then Vader entered the room. When their eyes met she knew immediately that he was angry with her for leaving.

"Lord Vader," Piett said, turning to Vader. "Welcome aboard."

Vader turned to Piett. "I will discuss your part in this later, Piett," he said in a tone that made Piett's blood run cold. "As well as you, Solo," he added.

Padmé was not impressed. "You needn't punish either of these men for what I did, Anakin," she said. "They were only acting under orders. My orders."

Vader looked back at her. "Very well," he said, not entirely convinced. He looked at Piett. 'Find accommodations for my children and their aunt,' he told him. "General Kenobi will also need a place. Solo, you can see to that," he added.

“At once, Lord Vader,” Piett replied, relieved to be off the hook. Both he and Han gave Padmé a look of gratitude as they escorted the others out of the conference room, leaving Padmé and Vader alone.

“Anakin, I know you’re angry, but...” she began, but was stopped when Vader took her by the shoulders and pressed his mouth to hers, kissing her passionately. She was surprised by this, and simply returned his kiss, knowing better than to expect that he’d decided not to be angry with her.

“What the hell were you thinking?” he demanded as he broke their kiss. “Why would you run off like that and not tell me?”

“If I’d told you you’d have tried to stop me,” she told him.

Vader folded his arms over his chest. “You’re right,” he replied. ‘I would have.’ “I couldn’t let you do that,” she replied, folding her own arms in the very same manner he had, determined not to let him intimidate her. “I knew what I was doing.”

“And what exactly was that?” he demanded. “What was your purpose in taking off that way?”

“I did it for you, Ani,” she said.

He frowned. “For me? What are you talking about? What did you do for me?”

“I went to the Senate and had Bail Organa arrested for High Treason,” she told him. “And let them know that I, as your representative, was assuming control of the Empire.”

Vader’s eyes widened as he listened to her.

“I knew that if the Senate was allowed to continue taking liberties with the power I foolishly gave them, you would have a very difficult time assuming control.”

“You arrested Organa?” he asked incredulously.

Padmé nodded. “Yes I did,” she replied. ‘He had assumed control of the Senate, Anakin. Can you see now why I had to act quickly?’

Vader nodded. “Yes, I suppose I can,” he replied. “I only wish you’d told me what you were up to. I woke up and knew you were gone, but I didn’t know where or why. It’s was terrifying not knowing where you were.”

She smiled, taking his face in her hands. “I’m fine,” she told him. “Piett and Han were with me the whole time; they never let me out of their sight. Besides, you know me well enough to know that I can look after myself.”

Vader lifted an eyebrow. “Yes, that’s what worries me,” he commented. “I’m just glad you’re okay and that we’re together,” he said, pulling her close to him again.

Padmé relaxed into his embrace, but then remembered her meeting with Tarkin. Vader felt her grow tense, and the smile left his face. “What is it?” he asked. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Tarkin came to the Senate,” she told him. “I don’t think he was expecting me to show up there,” she added.

Vader frowned, the thought of Tarkin being near Padmé filling him with rage. “What did he want? What did he say to you?” he asked.

“He had a proposition for me,” she told him. “For us, actually.”

“Proposition? What proposition?” he asked.

“He offered an alliance,” she explained. “You and me in alliance with him,” she continued.

“To what end?” Vader asked, having a feeling that he knew what the answer to his question was before she provided it.

“He wants to rule the Empire with you,” she told him. “He figures since he has the Death Star, you have no choice but to agree to it. He needs you because you control the clones. He has it all figured out,” she commented.

“He must be mad,” Vader said hotly. ‘No way in hell that I’d ever enter into an alliance with him!’

“I know that, Ani,” she said. “But he’s a dangerous man. We can’t simply ignore him or hope he goes away.”

“What are you suggesting, Padmé? That we actually entertain his proposal?”

“No, that’s not what I’m suggesting,” she replied. “What I am suggesting is that we tread very carefully where he’s concerned. He wants a response in forty-eight hours, Ani. We have to be ready with one or Force knows what he will do.”

Vader nodded, and sat down on the edge of the table. “What did you tell him?” he asked.

“I...I told him I would think about his proposal,” she told him. ‘He has invited me to take a tour of the Death Star tomorrow,’ she added. “I agreed to come.”

Chapter 72

Seventy-two

Star Destroyer Exactor

Vader stared at his wife in disbelief for a moment before responding. “You’re not serious,” he replied finally. “He wants you to come so he can use you against me, and I won’t allow it, Padmé. This has gone far enough. You’ve already been through too much because of this bloody Empire. I won’t let you go through any more.”

“Anakin, listen to me,” she said, taking his face in her hands again. ‘I want to help you. I *can* help you. Tarkin doesn’t know your injuries have been repaired,’ she explained. “He doesn’t know you’re coming with me. Don’t you think that if you were able to get onboard that space station that you’d be able to find a weakness? Something we can use to eliminate the threat it poses?”

Vader considered her words, and stood up to pace. She knew that he thought better while pacing, and let him work through what she was suggesting in his mind. He looked over at her finally. “It’s very risky,” he said. “We could end up his prisoners.”

“Tarkin isn’t stupid,” she replied. “He knows you have the clone army at your disposal, otherwise he’d have simply seized control outright.”

Vader nodded. “True,” he agreed, unable to find a flaw in her logic. “And what if we can’t find a way to disable the thing? What then?”

Padmé smiled and walked over to him. “What? The greatest mechanical mind in the galaxy is admitting defeat? I can’t believe my ears!”

Vader smiled. “Nice try,” he said. “But I’m serious,” he said, doing his best to ignore the all too familiar look in her eyes.

“I know you are,” she replied, running her hands up over his taut chest. “And I also know that you will find a way. You’re a mechanical genius, Anakin. You built a pod racer when you were a child, remember?”

“I remember,” he replied, taking her hands and stopping them before they undid him completely. “But a pod racer and a Death Star are not exactly in the same league, Angel.”

Padmé looked at him. “Are you saying you don’t think it can be destroyed?” she asked. “You’ve been inside of it before, haven’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ve had a hand in its design even, haven’t you?”

“Well, not really, but...”

“But you were there when it was being built,” she continued.

Vader nodded. He sighed, knowing that she was not going to give up on this. “And you’re right, there is a way. It would entail rewriting a great deal of the computer programming in order to bring the weapons offline. I would need time to do that.”

Padmé thought back to the conversation she’d had with Tarkin and an idea came to her. “I could buy you the time you need,” she said.

Vader frowned, sensing her sudden tension. “How?” he asked warily.

“Let’s just say that Governor Tarkin finds me... fascinating,” she said.

“What do you mean by *that*?” he demanded hotly.

“He told me that my beauty far exceeds its reputation,” she told him.

Vader’s frown deepened. “Did he now?”

“Yes,” she replied, loving the fact that he was growing more jealous by the minute. “And that...how did he put it? He couldn’t imagine how a beautiful, vibrant woman such as me could be married to Darth Vader, who, in his opinion, is little more than a droid.”

“Bastard,” he growled. “I’ll take his empty flattery and shove it up his...”

“Ani,” she said, putting a finger over his lips. “Don’t you get it? I can distract him while you do what you need to do. It’s perfect.”

“Perfect?? That lecherous pig drooling over my wife?? How is that perfect?” he demanded.

She smiled. “You don’t really think I’ll let him touch me, do you?” she asked. “Please. I know what I’m doing, Ani. Admit it; it’s a good plan.”

“No, it’s a terrible plan and I hate it,” he grumbled.

“You are so cute when you’re jealous,” she told him, running her hands up the sides of his face.

“Don’t try to change the subject,” he warned her.

“I’m not,” she said, moving closer to him so that her body was pressed against his. “I’m just tired of talking about Tarkin,” she told him, running her hands down over his broad shoulders.

Vader could feel his anger starting to ebb as she worked her magic over him.

“You like the clothes?” she asked, running her hands down his chest next.

Vader nodded, watching her, feeling himself growing excited under her unrelenting attention and proximity.

“They look wonderful on you,” she told him with a smile. “You always did look so sexy in black,” she added.

Finally Vader had to smile. “You know they say that flattery will get you no where,” he told her, running his hands up the length of her arms. “But in this case, I’d have to say it may do just that.”

Padmé lifted an eyebrow. “Oh? And where will it get me?” she asked.

“Onto that table,” he told her, brushing his lips over her temple.

Padmé felt a rush of warmth flood her. “The table?” she asked. “And why would I end up there?” she teased.

“Because I’m not sure I can wait until any longer to touch you,” he told her, wrapping his arms around her and running his hands down her back.

“Ani,” she sighed as his lips grazed over her neck. “What about Tarkin? What about the Death Star?”

“Who?”

She smiled. “Does that mean you’re confident that you can find a way to neutralize the Death Star?” she asked, closing her eyes.

“Yes,” he murmured, kissing her neck softly as his hands moved to unbutton the back of her gown.

Padmé laughed, realizing that the victory was hers.

A little while later...

As they regained their breath, Vader pressed his brow to hers. “That was amazing,” she told him softly.

Vader nodded in agreement. “You make me lose control,” he told her. “You’ve always been able to do that to me.”

She smiled, glad to hear it. “Maybe we ought to get to the kids before they start wondering where we are.”

“Yes, good idea,” he replied as he started to help her get dressed.

Elsewhere on the Exactor

Obi-Wan and Han Solo looked up as Sola entered the room.

“They’re finally asleep,” she reported as she sat down with them.

“Good,” Han said. “They can be hard to settle down sometimes when they’re over excited.”

“Being on a star destroyer for the first time is bound to excite any youngling,” Obi-Wan commented. “I do hope Anakin understands Padmé’s reasoning,” he added.

“So do I,” Sola agreed. “She certainly doesn’t need any more stress in her life. She’s been through proper hell lately.”

“She’s a strong lady, though,” Han remarked. “And from what I’ve seen, has been more than able to handle Lord Vader,” he added with a smile.

Obi-Wan smiled. “That’s certainly true,” he agreed.

Sola nodded. "You know for ten years I listened to Padmé tell me how much she hated Vader," she told the men. "And when she told me that she was living with him to be with the twins, I feared for the worst. But seeing them together I know now that they belong together."

"Yes, I have to agree," Obi-Wan replied. 'I only wish Anakin had confided in me all those years ago,' he added wistfully. "Perhaps what happened to him could have been avoided if he had."

The conversation ended as Vader and Padmé entered the room.

"Everything okay?" Sola asked as she and the others stood up.

Vader nodded, putting a hand on Padmé's shoulder. "Yes," he said, looking at her. 'But we have some plans to make,' he added, looking over at Obi-Wan and Han. "And we don't have a lot of time, so let's get to it."

Obi-Wan nodded. "By all means," he agreed. "Let's."

Chapter 73

Seventy-three

"Are Luke and Leia in bed?" Padmé asked.

"They just went down," Sola told her. "They were rather keyed up about being on their father's ship," she added.

Padmé smiled. "I'm sure," she replied. 'Thanks for looking after them, Sola,' she added. "I'm going to change," she said, deciding she needed some freshening up. "I'll be right back."

Sola watched her leave, smiling when she saw that two of the buttons on the back of her dress were in the wrong holes. *If that's your idea of negotiations, Padmé, then all the power to you,* she thought with amusement.

"Tarkin has decided to make life difficult for us," Vader began as he sat down. "He issued a proposal to Padmé that an alliance be formed between him and me," he continued.

"An alliance?" Obi-Wan asked incredulously.

Vader nodded. "Can you believe his audacity?"

"Tarkin is just another governor, isn't he?" Sola asked.

"No, he's a lot more than that," Vader told her. "He's the commander of the Death Star. And that makes him a dangerous man."

"Death Star?" Obi-Wan asked, almost afraid to ask. "What the devil is that?"

"It's a space station," Vader told him. "It was Palpatine's greatest accomplishment, at least in his opinion."

"What's so special about a space station?" Sola asked.

"It's not just a space station," Han explained. "Rumour has it that it has enough fire power to destroy an entire planet."

Obi-Wan looked at Vader in shock. "Is the rumour true?" he asked simply.

"Oh yes," Vader replied. "The Empire has been working in secret on this monstrosity since the fall of the Republic ten years ago. Tarkin was put in charge of it, and the power has quite clearly gone to his head."

"Yes, obviously," Sola remarked as Padmé re-entered the room. 'So what does he want from you two? You're the emperor, Anakin. How does he figure he even has the right to ask you for anything at all?'

"Because he has the Death Star," Vader told her. "And although he never said it, I'm sure his intention is to use it to get whatever he wants. He knows I have the support of the clones, or else he'd have just taken it outright. He figures I need him as much as he needs me. Well, he's wrong."

“So what is the plan?” Obi-Wan asked.

“The plan is we are going to the Death Star,” Padmé replied, sitting beside her husband. “Tomorrow.”

“You’re *both* going?” Sola asked. “Padmé, this is bound to be dangerous!”

“Yes, that’s why Anakin is coming too,” Padmé replied. “I’ve already told Tarkin I would come. If I back out now, he’ll suspect something is amiss.”

Obi-Wan considered this for a moment, stroking his beard thoughtfully. “Perhaps it would be prudent not to show all your cards at once, Anakin,” he said finally.

“What do you mean?” Vader asked.

“I mean if you mean to accompany Padmé, perhaps you ought to do so without revealing who you are,” Obi-Wan explained.

“You mean a disguise?” Han asked.

“Or a mask,” Obi-Wan added.

“I told the droids on Kamino to throw my mask in the incinerator,” Anakin replied.

“What about a royal guard?” Sola suggested. “You’re the empress now, aren’t you Padmé?” she asked.

“Yes,” Padmé replied.

“So you’d have imperial guards to protect you,” Sola continued. “Anakin could disguise himself as one, and hide his true identity from Tarkin.”

Vader nodded. “Yes, yes that’s brilliant,” he said. “That would buy me the time I need to access the computer files.”

Padmé smiled. “It’s perfect,” she said.

“Yes it is,” Obi-Wan agreed. “But aren’t members of royalty usually accompanied by two guards?” he asked.

“Yes,” Vader replied. ‘But I need you to help Han protect the twins, Obi-Wan. I need the three of you to take Luke and Leia home,’ he added, looking at Sola and then Han. “I want them to have some degree of normalcy in their lives again,” he continued.

“You know the twins won’t like being separated from you and Padmé again,” Sola pointed out.

“I know,” Vader replied. “But it won’t be for long, hopefully.”

“Perhaps we could arrange to have your family brought to Coruscant,” Padmé suggested to her sister. “I know you must be missing them.”

Sola nodded. “I am,” she admitted. “That would be wonderful. I know they’re anxious to meet Luke and Leia.”

“Then it’s settled,” Vader said. ‘We’ll leave for the Death Star first thing in the morning,’ he added, looking at Padmé. He looked at Han next. “We’ll need two royal guards’

uniforms,” he said. “And tell Captain Rex I have a special assignment for him.”

Han nodded. “I’ll get on that right away, sir,” he replied, standing up.

“I think we should call it a night,” Padmé said. “Though I don’t imagine I’ll sleep much tonight,” she added.

“No, me neither,” Vader concurred.

“Did Piett find you a place to sleep?” Padmé asked Sola and Obi-Wan.

“Yes he did,” Sola replied, standing up. “And I’m pretty worn out, so I think I’ll make my way there now.”

“Goodnight,” Padmé said, hugging her sister. “See you in the morning.”

Sola nodded. “Sleep well, Padmé,” she replied.

Obi-Wan left with Sola, leaving Padmé and Vader alone.

“I want to check on the kids,” Padmé said, walking to the bedroom where Luke and Leia were asleep. Vader followed, just as eager to see them.

Both twins were sound asleep when Vader and Padmé entered the room. Padmé walked over and pulled a blanket up over Luke, something she’d started doing ever since she’d rediscovered her children. Vader watched Leia as she slept, smiling as she wrapped one of her braids around her baby finger as she slept.

“Seems they’re down for the count,” Padmé commented as Vader bent and planted a kiss on the brow of each of his children.

“I think so,” he said. “I can’t tell you how wonderful it is to be able to kiss them goodnight finally,” he added, looking up at her with a smile.

Padmé nodded. “I’m sure it must be,” she agreed. “There are so many things you’ll be able to do again now, Ani.”

Vader nodded and stood up. “Do you realize that tonight we will share a bed for the first time in more than ten years?” he asked his wife as he took her hand with a smile.

Padmé nodded, returning his smile. “I thought of that too,” she replied as they left the twins’ room quietly. “It’s been a long time since I woke up next to you,” she said.

“Too long,” Vader agreed, bringing her hand up to his mouth and kissing it softly. “I can’t wait to wake up with you in my arms,” he told her.

Padmé felt herself growing excited simply by the way he was looking at her. “Ani, you can’t possibly be in the mood again so soon,” she teased as he wrapped his arms around her.

“No?” he asked, bending and kissing the side of her neck. “Why not?”

Padmé smiled. “I guess that means you’re feeling well,” she remarked.

“Very well.”

“No side effects from the surgery?”

“None.”

Padmé laughed. “Well, I beg to differ,” she replied.

Vader looked down at her. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“I think you definitely have some side effects,” she told him.

Vader frowned slightly. “Really? What?” he asked.

“I think your libido has increased tenfold,” she told him with a smile.

Vader’s smile returned as he ran his hands down the length of her arms. “You say that like it’s a bad thing,” he quipped.

“Oh, it’s not a bad thing,” she assured him. “We have long time to make up for, remember?” she reminded him.

“I remember,” he said. “Ten years. That’s a long time.”

“A very long time,” she agreed as he pulled her closer and kissed her. Padmé wrapped her arms around his neck as their kiss deepened. Without breaking their kiss, Vader picked her up into his arms and carried her into the nearby bedroom, the door sliding closed behind them.

Death Star

“Welcome back, Governor,” Tarkin’s aide said as he descended the ramp of his shuttle. “I take it your voyage was a successful one?”

“Yes, quite,” Tarkin replied. “We are having a most important visitor tomorrow, so make arrangements for living quarters.”

“A visitor, sir?” the man replied, falling into step beside Tarkin. “Who?”

“Lady Vader,” Tarkin told him with a smug smile. “I believe the dear lady will be most cooperative once she sees the magnitude of this station,” he gloated.

“But what about Vader?” the aide asked. “He’s the emperor now, remember?”

“Yes, of course I remember,” Tarkin snapped irritably. ‘But even the emperor isn’t infallible. He needs this station to maintain control,’ he continued, the smug smile on his face growing. “And I control this station.”

The aide nodded. “So... you think that Vader’s wife will make him see reason?”

“As of right now Vader’s wife is in charge, remember?” Tarkin reminded him. ‘And I can assure you that over the course of the next two days I will make sure that she accepts my offer. She’s a frustrated, lonely woman who has no idea how to run an empire. I will become her best friend, and her greatest ally. I know how to handle her, have no fear,’ he bragged. “Two days from now I’ll have the Lady Vader eating out of the palm of my hand.”

The aide smiled, more convinced than ever that Wilhuff Tarkin was the greatest man in the galaxy.

Star Destroyer Exactor

Strong tremors in the Force shook Luke as he awoke. He could feel his heart hammering in his chest as waves of darkness crashed all around him. Luke pushed them away, refusing to give in to them. He got out of bed, and stumbled through the darkened room.

From somewhere not far off he could hear the sound of crying. He knew at once who it was, and it bothered him tremendously to hear his mother crying. His mother was one of the strongest people he knew; what could be making her cry??

Luke left his room and found himself outside. But he wasn't home, on Coruscant; this was a strange, alien landscape that reeked of sulphur. It was hot, hotter than Tatooine had ever been, and Luke wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. The sound of crying was gone now, but he felt the dark presence close by. Turning slowly Luke saw a figure approaching him, and he recognized his aura as being that of his father. But this was not the father he'd come to know and love; this man's eyes were yellow, and they bore into Luke in a manner that made Luke want to scream for help...

Luke awoke with a start, the emotions created by his dream shaking him out of his slumber. He sat up in bed and looked around, discombobulated for a moment. And then he remembered where he was.

Slipping out of bed, Luke listened for a moment to ensure that his sister was still asleep. Satisfied that she was, Luke left the room and went to find his parents. He sensed their presence nearby, and simply stood outside their room for a moment. They were asleep, and, from what he could tell, happy and relaxed. Luke frowned as the disjointed images from his dream popped into his mind once more, and he activated the door to his parents' room. The light from the corridor fell upon the bed in the center of the room, and Luke smiled with relief when he saw his parents. His mother was nestled up against his father, whose strong arms were wrapped around her protectively. They were the picture of contentment and love, and Luke felt foolish for ever thinking they could ever be otherwise. *Everything is perfect now*, he told himself as he left his parents' room. *And the future is going to be perfect too, I just know it.*

Chapter 74

Seventy-four

Star Destroyer Exactor

The Skywalker family was up early the next morning, the day that lay ahead of them promising to be a full one.

Luke was unusually quiet as he ate breakfast, the images from his dream the previous night still haunting him.

“Will Ryoo and Pooja be joining us when we get home?” Leia asked her aunt.

Sola nodded. “Yes, at least for a few days,” she agreed. “I don’t know how long your parents are going to need me to stay,” she added, looking at Padmé and Vader.

“I suppose that all depends on how things go on the Death Star,” Padmé replied.

“Things will go just fine on the Death Star,” Vader assured her, putting a hand on hers. “Tarkin doesn’t stand a chance, I promise you.”

Just then the door chime sounded.

“That will be Han,” Vader said, standing up. “Hopefully he was able to acquire some uniforms.”

Sure enough, Han had managed to get his hands on two uniforms, not without some creative wheeling and dealing, however.

“Looks like everything is in place,” Padmé said, anxiety welling up inside of her suddenly. She looked at the twins. “Are you two all packed?”

“I am,” Leia replied.

Padmé nodded and looked at Luke, waiting for a response. “Luke? What about you? Luke?”

Luke looked up from his breakfast. “Sorry Mom,” he said. “What did you say?”

Padmé and Vader exchanged a look of concern.

“Something bothering you, Luke?” Vader asked.

Luke shook his head, not wanting to discuss his nightmare with his father. “No, just... tired,” he replied. “I didn’t sleep well last night.”

“He’s so excited about going back to school,” Leia explained, sensing that there was something more to her brother’s mood than he was letting on.

“Bad dreams, son?” Vader asked, hoping his intuitions were wrong.

Luke looked up at his father, surprised by his question. “How did you know?” he asked.

Vader sighed. "Father's intuition," he replied.

"What was it about?" Padmé asked.

Luke shrugged. "I don't know really," he replied. 'It was kinda weird,' he told her. "But scary at the same time. Does that make any sense?"

"Yes," Vader replied. "Completely."

"You're probably just anxious about the changes in our lives," Padmé said. "And you're worried about your father and I going to the Death Star."

"Yeah, I am," Luke agreed.

"So am I," Leia piped up. "Are you sure you need to do this?" she asked.

"I'm afraid so," Padmé replied. "Tarkin is a dangerous man who needs to be handled quickly and carefully. That is exactly what we intend to do."

Luke and Leia looked at one another, trying to be brave.

"Don't worry kids," Han said. "Your parents know what they're doing. Why don't we get going? The shuttle is all set to go."

"Good idea," Sola said, standing up. "I'm sure your parents need to get on their way soon too," she added.

"Unfortunately that is true," Vader replied. "We can't get underway until your shuttle has left the ship."

"Okay Dad," Leia said, standing up. 'Come on Luke,' she added. "Let's get our stuff."

Luke nodded and stood up and then left the room with his sister. Vader watched him go.

"I hope there's nothing more to his dream than just normal worries," Vader said to his wife.

Padmé nodded in agreement. "Yes, so do I."

A short time later, Luke and Leia bade an emotional goodbye to their parents and then boarded a shuttle with their aunt and guardians. Padmé and Vader watched the shuttle as it lifted off, both of them feeling their children's absence already.

"We'll see them soon," Vader assured his wife, putting an arm around her.

Padmé nodded, trying not to cry. "I know," she said softly.

"Come on Angel," he said. "It's show time."

Death Star

Governor Tarkin paced up and down in the command center of the mighty space station. He'd transmitted the Death Star's coordinates to the *Exactor* almost 12 hours earlier, but as yet he'd not heard from either its captain or Lady Vader. Tarkin frowned. *Foolish woman*, he thought petulantly. *Does she think I'm bluffing?? Does she have any idea who she's dealing with?*

“Sir, we’re receiving a message from the *Exactor*,” the communications officer informed him.

Tarkin turned to him quickly. “Relay it,” he commanded.

“Captain Piett reports that they have just come out of hyperspace,” the young man told him. “They will rendezvous with us in twenty minutes. Lady Vader’s shuttle is preparing for departure.”

Tarkin smiled. “Excellent,” he replied smugly. He looked over at Tagge as though to say *I told you so*. “Arrange for an appropriate welcome for the Empress,” he said.

Tagge nodded, rather annoyed at being treated like a junior officer. “I’ll see to it at once,” he said, and left the room.

Tarkin clasped his hands behind his back, smirking in a most self-satisfied manner. *Soon, my dear lady*, he thought, his smirk growing, *soon we’ll become very close and our alliance will forge our new empire... my new empire....*

Imperial Shuttle en route to the Death Star

Padmé unclasped and clasped her hands nervously as the shuttle drew closer to the huge sphere. She watched it growing larger, still hardly able to believe the sheer size of it. Knots of anxiety tightened inside of her with each meter they travelled.

Vader felt her anxiety, and felt it too. The thought that his ruse would be discovered had crossed his mind, but he refused to let it dwell there. *This will work*, he vowed; *Tarkin will not win*.

“Sir?”

Vader looked over to where Captain Rex stood in the doorway of the passenger lounge.

“What is it?” Vader asked.

“The Death Star has cleared us,” Rex reported. “We’re starting our approach.”

Vader nodded. “Acknowledged,” he said simply. He looked at his wife, sensing her tension level rise. ‘It’s going to work, Angel,’ he told her. “Don’t worry.”

Padmé nodded and stood up. “I know,” she said, walking over to him. “I have faith in you, Ani. I always have.”

Vader nodded, and took her face in his hands. “And I have every faith in you,” he replied. “You’ve faced many foes more formidable than Tarkin, Padmé. He has no idea who he’s up against,” he told her with a smile.

Padmé smiled, loving him for trying to bolster her confidence. “I hope you’re right,” she replied. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen any political action, though.”

“You’ve been parenting precocious twins for several months,” he reminded her. “I’d say that’s more challenging, wouldn’t you?”

Padmé laughed. “Well, perhaps at times,” she agreed. “You’d better get suited up,” she told him.

"I suppose so," Vader agreed, looking over at the red robe and mask that sat on a nearby seat. "I hate the thought of wearing a mask again," he told her quietly.

Padmé ran her hand up the side of his arm, rubbing it comfortingly "I know," she replied. "But it's not for long."

Vader nodded. "Yes, thankfully." He picked up the robe and started to get ready, as both prepared themselves mentally for what lay ahead.

The Death Star hangar bay

Lines of clone troopers stood in formation, standing at attention as the Empress' shuttle landed on the floor of the enormous hangar. The station's commander, Governor Tarkin, stood nearby, flanked by his senior officers. Tarkin watched as the shuttle came to a stop. Moments later the shuttle's door opened, and a ramp emerged and came to rest on the deck. A dozen clones emerged from the shuttle and took up position along the ramp. They were followed by two red-robed Imperial guards, who stood at the foot of the ramp. Tarkin smiled as the empress emerged, his eyes roving over her with avid appreciation.

"Your majesty," Tarkin began, bowing to Padmé, followed by his side kicks. "Welcome to the Death Star."

Padmé gave him her best diplomatic smile, although the way he was looking at her made her skin crawl. "Thank you Governor," she replied graciously. "I look forward to touring this remarkable station."

"As I look forward to showing it to you," Tarkin replied, falling into step beside Padmé while his subordinates walked behind.

Behind his mask, Vader watched with growing irritation as Tarkin walked along side Padmé. *Get away from her, you snake*, he thought irately; *you're too close!*

Just then Tarkin stumbled, and nearly fell. Padmé had to suppress her smile, for she knew exactly what had happened. Tarkin recovered himself, his face growing rather red as he did so. "I have arranged quarters for you, Milady," he said. "It will take a long time to show you everything and I decided a place to sleep might be an acceptable liberty to take."

Padmé nodded, inwardly hating the thought of staying any longer than necessary. "Yes, it is," she replied. "Thank you, Governor."

"Not at all, your majesty," he said, bowing to her once again.

Vader stayed as close as he could, wanting to hear every word. He could see the thoughts in Tarkin's mind, and they only added to his anger. *This was a bad idea*, he thought in frustration. *I never should have let it come down to this.*

Coruscant

Dinner had concluded, and Luke and Leia were in the common room doing their homework. It had been exciting to be back at school, and all their friends had peppered them with questions about their trip to Kamino, about their parents, and what it was like to be the children of the new emperor. Leia had fielded most of the questions, secretly loving all the attention. Luke had remained rather quiet, which, Leia had decided, was not like him at all.

She had waited all day to talk to him alone, to ask what was bothering him, and now she had her chance.

“Okay Luke,” Leia said as she switched off her datapad. “What’s going on?”

Luke looked up from his own work. “What?” he asked.

Leia frowned. “Don’t *what* me,” she replied. “You’ve been quiet and moody all day. What’s going on? And don’t me it’s nothing because I know better.”

Luke frowned, and looked down at his notes again. “I don’t want to talk about it,” he grumbled.

Leia waited a moment, and then took the datapad from his hands. Luke looked up at her in shock.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he demanded angrily.

“Talk to me, Luke,” Leia said, starting to grow concerned. “I know something is bugging you. I want to help.”

Luke sighed and sat back in his chair. “I don’t know how you can do that,” he told her. “Unless you’ve found a way to erase somebody’s mind.”

Leia frowned. “What does that mean?” she asked.

Luke hesitated for a moment, but then decided she wasn’t about to let this alone. “I had a nightmare last night,” he told her. “I think it was about Mom and Dad.”

“You think it was?” Leia asked. “You mean you’re not sure?”

Luke shook his head. “I never saw Mom,” he explained. “I just heard her... she was crying,” he told her, looking up at her, his eyes troubled.

Leia nodded. “And Dad?”

Luke looked away, and Leia could feel the fear he was feeling just remembering. “His eyes, Leia,” he said. “They were yellow. He was really scary. And then I woke up.”

“That’s it?” she asked. “Nothing happened?”

“Not really,” Luke replied. “I remember being on a planet where there was lots of fire, and it smelled really bad, like some sort of chemicals. It was hot, really *really* hot,” he explained. “I don’t know where it was, but it gave me the creepiest feeling. Like something really bad had happened there, or was going to happen there.”

“Mustafar,” Leia said as it dawned on her. “That sounds like Mustafar, the planet where Dad and Obi-Wan Kenobi fought.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s what it was,” Luke agreed. “But...why would I dream about that?”

Leia shrugged. “I don’t know, Luke,” she replied. “Maybe you’re just worried about Dad and Mom, and this is your mind’s way of expressing that worry.”

“I guess,” Luke replied. “Whatever it was, it was really disturbing. I’m almost afraid to go to sleep tonight. I don’t want to have that dream again.”

Leia nodded. "I bet," she said. "Why don't we watch a holovid before we go to bed? That might take your mind off of it."

"We're not allowed to watch vids on a school night," Luke reminded her.

Leia shrugged. "So? I'd say this counts as a time to make an exception to that rule."

Luke smiled a little. "Yeah, I think so too," he replied. "Thanks, Leia. You're a good sister."

Leia stood up with a smile. "I know," she replied simply.

Chapter 75

Seventy-five

Death Star

“As you can see, your majesty, the station is state of the art,” Tarkin bragged as he showed Padmé around the command center, her two red robed guards walking closely behind them. “The late emperor was a visionary, who sought out only the most brilliant minds in the galaxy to design this station.”

Padmé nodded, the mention of the emperor sending a shudder down her spine. “Impressive,” she forced herself to say.

Tarkin nodded, pleased that he’d managed to impress her. “Yes, very much so,” he said, taking a moment to admire her as she examined an instrument panel. Vader watched as Tarkin’s eyes moved over Padmé, the anger within him growing until he had to fight not to strangle the man where he stood. Unable to stand by and do nothing, Vader moved over to stand beside Padmé, making it clear that he could see what Tarkin was doing. At once Tarkin looked away, clearing his throat and smoothing down his tunic as he did so.

“Shall we continue with our tour?” Tarkin suggested.

Padmé looked up, surprised to see Vader standing nearby. “Yes,” she said. “By all means.”

Tarkin stood waiting for Padmé, looking at the rather large guard at her side. Even though he could not see his face, Tarkin was sure that the man was watching him closely.

“Tell me, Milady,” Tarkin began as he walked along side Padmé, “how is Lord Vader? I was most distressed to hear that he was injured.”

Liar, Vader thought venomously.

“He is recovering,” Padmé replied. “He was very badly injured trying to protect the late emperor.”

Tarkin nodded solemnly. “Yes, quite tragic,” he replied. “I do hope he’ll be up and about soon.”

Padmé looked at him, knowing his concern was feigned even without her husband’s ability to read minds. “I’m sure he would appreciate your concern,” she remarked.

Tarkin looked at her, trying to decide if she was being sarcastic. “I like to hope he would,” he replied with an oily smile. “I do have the highest regard for your husband, despite... well...”

“Despite the fact that he’s a difficult man to like?” Padmé said, looking at him.

Tarkin was quite surprised by her comment, and it pleased him. “Well, I didn’t want to say that, Milady,” he said.

“Why not? It’s the truth,” she replied, looking away again, playing the part perfectly.

Tarkin smiled, pleased by the frustration he heard behind her words. “I’m sorry, Milady,” he said. “I seem to have struck upon a...sensitive issue,” he commented.

Padmé said nothing in response, which only made Tarkin smile more.

Vader, who of course had heard the entire exchange, forced himself to contain his ire as Tarkin entertained lewd thoughts about Padmé. He clenched his fists as they stepped onto the lift, feeling as though he would explode if he didn’t do something to deflate Tarkin. And then he had an idea.

Padmé felt uneasy standing in the lift with Tarkin, and was immensely glad of Rex and her husband’s presence. By now she’d had just about all she could take of Tarkin, and looked at Vader, hoping he’d sense her feelings and find a way out for her. But Vader was looking at Tarkin, or at least that’s how it appeared to Padmé. *He’s doing well not to have killed him by now*, she reflected, realizing that two months ago, even two weeks ago, he would have done so without hesitation. *He’s coming back to me*, she thought with a smile; *I know he is*.

As for Tarkin, he was trying to think of a way to get rid of Padmé’s guards. They had not left her side since she had boarded the ship, and he was beginning to grow tired of their intimidating presence.

All thoughts of the guards were pushed from Tarkin’s mind as he suddenly became aware of a very persistent itch in a rather sensitive part of his anatomy. He looked over at Padmé, who was not looking at him. Her guards, however, were, and so Tarkin had to suppress the urge to scratch. But the itch only grew worse, making him almost squirm from his discomfort.

Vader watched, the smile on his face broadening as he watched Tarkin now squirming visibly. *That’s it you rat bastard*, he thought with delight, *squirm...*

Rex, who had no idea what Vader had done, was enjoying the governor’s obvious discomfort nonetheless and simply watched with a smile to see what would unfold.

Padmé, who was finding the ride up the lift to be taking far too long, glanced at Tarkin, and did a double take as she saw the expression on his face. It was a cross between pain and desperation. *Ani*, she thought with a smirk, knowing without a doubt that he was somehow responsible for Tarkin’s obvious discomfort.

“Something wrong?” she asked at last, suppressing a smile with difficulty.

Tarkin looked at her and forced himself to smile. “No, not at thing,” he lied. ‘I was just thinking that perhaps you’d like to see the quarters I arranged for you,’ he said, grasping at straws. “I need to...attend to some things, and...”

“Yes, I would like a break, actually,” Padmé interjected, thankful for whatever her husband had done to make Tarkin this desperate to be excused.

“I thought you might,” Tarkin replied, shifting on his feet as the itch slowly spread to other parts of his nether region. ‘I’ve arranged a formal dinner tonight with my senior officers,’ he told her as the lift came to a halt. “They are most eager to meet you, of course,” he added for good measure.

"I look forward to it," Padmé said as Tarkin escorted her, at a rather brisk pace, to her quarters. "I hope everything is to your liking," he said, rushing the words together as they stopped before the door to Padmé's assigned quarters.

"I'm sure they will be," she replied, having a hard time not laughing at Tarkin's now desperate state. 'Thank you Governor,' she said, deciding to prolong it a wee bit further. "I can certainly see how this station would make a valuable asset to the ruler of the Empire," she commented.

Tarkin nodded, as perspiration started to form on his brow.

"To be honest," Padmé continued, "I really didn't know what to expect upon coming here. But I have to say that I am very impressed with what I have seen so far."

Tarkin smiled, but only barely. "I'm delighted," he said. 'If you'll excuse me, Milady,' he said, inching away, "I really must return to my duties."

With that Tarkin turned heel and stepped away rather quickly. Padmé watched him for a moment and then covered her mouth to hide her mirth as Vader entered the room, followed by his wife. Rex took up his post outside the door, chuckling to himself as he did so.

"What did you..." she began, turning to Vader, but was stopped by him, holding up one finger meant to silence her. She was puzzled for a moment, and then realized what he was doing as he moved about the room.

Vader walked around the spacious suite, knowing he would find what he suspected Tarkin had put there; and, before long, he did. *Pig*, he thought irately as he used the Force to deactivate both surveillance cameras he found as well as the listening devices. Once he had, he turned to his wife. "That bastard was going to watch you," he told her, pulling off the mask. "But now he can't."

Padmé frowned. "You mean... he had these rooms bugged?"

Vader nodded. "He'll be very disappointed when he doesn't get to watch you undress tonight," he told her with a frown. 'The filthy disease,' he growled. "I should have killed him the moment he first looked at you."

Padmé smiled, and walked over to him. "Now that wouldn't have been very prudent, would it?" she asked.

"No," he agreed, placing his hands on her shoulders. He smirked as he remembered Tarkin's hasty retreat down the hall. "Did you enjoy the show?" he asked.

"What did you do to him?" she asked.

Vader smiled, running his hands down her arms slowly. "I gave him an itch," he told her. "A really embarrassing, really bad itch," he said.

Padmé laughed in delight. "Beautiful!" she said. "It was wonderful to watch him squirm."

Vader nodded. "I wanted to do far worse," he told her. "But, as you said, that wouldn't have been prudent."

Padmé nodded. "No, it wouldn't," she said.

“And you have to have dinner with him and his flunkys tonight,” he said. “If he thinks you’re coming alone, he’s got another thing coming. I’m not letting that reptile anywhere near you without me by your side.”

Padmé smiled, and reached up to take his face in her hands. “I know,” she said. ‘Pretty soon this will all be behind us,’ she reminded him. “And we’ll be home with the kids.”

Vader nodded. “Not soon enough for me,” he told her. “Let’s get to work,” he said, releasing her and heading for the computer console.

Padmé followed him, more than eager to get started.

Coruscant

“I can’t get over how much you look like Aunt Padmé,” Ryoo said with a smile.

Leia smiled, and sat up a little straighter in her chair. She was totally enthralled by her two teenage cousins. Sola’s family had arrived for a visit while Luke and Leia were at school, and since arriving home the twins had spent virtually every moment getting to know their cousins.

“That’s what our dad says too,” Leia told her cousins.

“Our mother told us about your dad’s surgery,” Pooja said. “I think it’s great that he doesn’t have to wear that awful mask anymore.”

“Yeah, we feel the same way,” Luke replied.

“We haven’t seen your father since we were little,” Pooja said. “But I remember him enough to know that you look a lot like him, Luke.”

Luke smiled. “Everybody says that,” he told them. “I just hope I can be as tall as him when I grow up.”

Han walked into the living room at this point, and both twins noticed how their cousins took note of him.

“You two get your homework done?” Han asked.

“Not yet,” Leia told him. “We wanted to visit with our cousins.”

Han looked at the two girls. He’d noted how attractive both of them were, almost as pretty as their Aunt Padmé; but he’d pushed that observation to the back of his mind, knowing it was foolish to even consider it. “Yeah, okay,” he relented. “But don’t forget about it before bedtime. You know your parents would be ticked if you didn’t do it.”

“Yeah, we know,” Luke replied. “We’ll get to it, Han. Promise.”

“Have you heard from Dad yet, Han?” Leia asked.

Han shook his head. “Nope, not yet,” he replied.

“I wonder how things are going,” Leia commented.

“Well knowing your parents, things are going just fine,” Han told them.

Luke and Leia nodded, hoping he was right.

Death Star

Vader and Padmé spent close to two hours scouring through the enormous database of the Death Star. It was gruelling, and when they finally took a break, both of them had started to develop a headache from eyestrain.

“There’s got to be something,” Vader stated, sitting back in his seat. “There simply has to be! The damn thing isn’t even finished yet. Surely there’s a flaw of some kind somewhere.”

Padmé nodded. “I’m sure there is,” she said, standing up. “And I’m sure you’ll find it too,” she added, walking around behind his chair to massage his shoulders.

Vader smiled. “That feels wonderful,” he told her, closing his eyes.

“You’re very tense,” she said as she rubbed her thumbs into his muscles.

“Can you blame me?” he replied. “I saw the way he was looking at you. I know the thoughts running through his mind, Padmé.”

“He is rather transparent,” she replied. ‘But you also know that those feelings will work in our favour, Ani,’ she reminded him. “So long as I can distract him, he won’t suspect what you’re doing.”

“I know, I know,” he replied as he opened his eyes. “That doesn’t mean I like it, Angel.”

Padmé bent and kissed him on the cheek. “You’re so cute when you’re jealous, Anakin.”

Vader frowned. “I am *not* cute,” he protested.

Padmé laughed. “Yes you are,” she responded. Just then the comm sounded.

“Excuse me, Milady,” Tarkin’s voice was heard. “I hope I’m not disturbing you.”

“Not at all, Governor,” she replied.

“I wanted to let you know that dinner will be served at 1800 hours,” Tarkin continued. “Shall I pick you up to escort you to the dining room?”

Padmé looked at Vader, whose frown deepened upon hearing these words.

“Yes, that would be fine,” she replied. “I’ll see you shortly.”

Padmé closed the transmission. “I guess I’d better get ready,” she told him.

“I hope you packed something ultra conservative,” he told her as she walked to the bedroom. “With a high collar and long sleeves!”

Padmé merely smiled.

Chapter 76

Seventy-Six

Death Star

Vader looked up from the computer console as he sensed his wife enter the room. At once he turned off the screen and stood up.

"You look too good," he told her, walking over to her. He folded his arms over his chest as he looked her over appraisingly. Finally he shook his head. 'No way,' he said. "You're showing too much."

Padmé sighed. "Ani, I'm not showing anything," she countered.

"I can see almost your entire arm," he told her. "Both of them."

Padmé had to fight not to smile. "Would you rather it *was* the entire arm?" she teased, "as well as some cleavage?"

Vader frowned. "Don't make light of this," he told her. "I've seen Tarkin's mind, Padmé. He's already thinking of you in a way that makes me want to tear him apart limb from limb. If he sees you like this he won't be able to hold himself back."

"Anakin, don't you think you're overreacting just a wee bit?" she asked as she put on her earrings.

"No, I don't," he returned.

"Ani," she said, running her hands up the length of his arms. 'Tarkin is not stupid enough to do anything,' she told him. "Particularly with my guard nearby."

Vader knew she was right. His mind knew she was right, but his heart, which had always been irrational, said otherwise. "I don't like it," he grumbled, not happy even now. "Not at all."

Padmé smiled, and ran her hands up into his spiky hair. "I love how protective you are," she told him.

Just then the door chime sounded, and they looked at one another. "I'll be right there," she called. 'You'd better get that on,' she told Vader, picking up the red mask he'd left on the desk. "It's time to go."

"Okay," he grumbled.

"Don't worry," she said. 'This will all be over soon enough,' she told him, and then turned to the door. "Thank you for waiting, Governor," she told Tarkin, who stood looking a little peeved outside her door. "I was in communication with my children," she explained.

Tarkin nodded in understanding. "You look radiant, Milady," he said, giving her a smile. "Shall we?" he asked, holding out an arm for her. He looked up as her guard appeared from

within the suite, and let his arm drop.

“By all means,” she replied. “You may have a break,” she told Rex before starting down the corridor.

Rex nodded, and watched the three of them walk away before stepping into the suite to replicate himself some dinner.

“Any news of the emperor?” Tarkin asked as they stepped onto a lift.

“Nothing new,” Padmé sighed. “I really don’t know what to expect. The press is most relentless and that certainly doesn’t make things easier.”

Tarkin nodded sympathetically. “I can imagine,” he said. ‘I do, however, have some connections within the media,’ he told her. “I could do my best to see that they back down until the emperor is well enough to speak for himself; assuming, of course, that day ever comes.”

Don’t you wish it wouldn’t, Vader thought as he stood behind Padme, his masked eyes fixed on Tarkin.

“I would be most grateful,” Padme said, casting her eyes down demurely. “It’s been so trying, all of this,” she added for good measure.

Tarkin smiled a purely lurid, purely evil smile that Padme couldn’t see. But Vader saw it, and it took every ounce of self-control that he possessed not to send the man into the bulkhead. Tarkin’s eyes moved briefly from Padmé up to the guard behind her, and the smile quickly left his face as he saw that the guard was watching him silently. Tarkin cleared his throat and looked away, clasping his hands behind his back nervously. The rest of the trip up the lift was made in silence. Luckily it wasn’t a long ride.

The dining room was already full of uniformed officers when Tarkin made his grand entrance with the empress at his side. At once all talking ceased as the men stood out of respect for Padmé. She nodded to each of them as Tarkin escorted her to the head of the table, where she was to sit on his right side. Vader came and stood behind his wife, the subtle nuances of the seating arrangement not lost on him, just as he was sure they were not lost on his wife. As the highest ranking personage in the room, she ought to be seated at the head of the table; and yet Tarkin was seated there. *You arrogant sleemo,* Vader thought angrily, his eyes boring into the back of Tarkin’s head. *You’ll pay for this, I promise you.*

“Gentlemen, may I propose a toast,” Tarkin said, lifting a glass of wine aloft. “To the beautiful Empress Vader,” he continued. “And to our continued... friendship.”

Padmé smiled graciously as the men clinked glasses. She could only imagine how irked her husband was right now, all thoughts of what had transpired earlier pushed aside in light of Tarkin’s overt pomposity. She turned her head and glanced out of the corner of her eyes at him. But Vader didn’t notice; for he was too busy sifting through the minds of everyone at the table, looking for something, anything useful to help them in their cause. Padmé trusted that he would behave himself, and turned her attention back to her dinner companions, sensing that this evening would try even her diplomatic skills to their limits.

Dinner was sumptuous, and the wine plentiful. Vader was rather disgusted with the amount of alcohol consumed by the officers. *No wonder the blasted station isn’t finished yet,* he

reflected darkly. Thus far he hadn't managed to learn anything important from the minds of the officers, who were all more concerned with trying to impress Padmé than anything else. There was one officer whose mind was far more disciplined than the others. *General Tagge*, Vader remembered, having met the man on more than one occasion. Tagge seemed to be as revolted by his fellow officers' excesses as Vader himself was. *Perhaps this is a man who can be reasoned with*, he thought. Tagge did not strike Vader as the type to follow along blindly with any of Tarkin's outrageous schemes.

"And how are the young prince and princess?" Tarkin asked Padmé as serving droids began serving dinner. "I imagine they are missing their mother."

"Yes, I'm sure they are," Padmé agreed. "Just as I miss them."

"I have to say, Milady," Admiral Motti spoke up, a smug smile on his face, 'that I was positively delighted to see you arrest that arrogant Senator Organa,' he stated. "It was about time he was put in his place."

"Senator Organa was arrested because my husband found evidence of his connection to the Rebel Alliance," Padmé responded. "The Senate was foolish enough to release him. A clear abuse of the power they were entrusted with."

"Shameless, really," Tarkin spoke up. "That they would take advantage of your trust that way, particularly with the crisis you were going through."

Padmé looked at him, the patronizing tone of his voice grating on her nerves. But she bit her tongue, knowing she couldn't let him get to her in the way he was attempting to. Instead she smiled. "Yes, I don't suppose they really expected that I would retaliate the way I did. I hope now they'll know better than to underestimate me."

Tarkin nodded, and exchanged a look with Motti, who simply smiled in response.

Vader could see the condescension in Motti's expression, and hated him for it. He'd never liked the smarmy little man; but now he found he wanted to do very bad things to him for the thoughts he was having about Padmé. *So, Motti, you're in cahoots with that scumbag Tarkin, are you? Think you're going to manipulate my wife, do you? We'll see about that...*

Motti had just taken a drink of wine when he started coughing rather violently. Wine spewed forth from his mouth, right into the face of the unfortunate man sitting across from him. The officer stood up at once, giving Motti a dirty look as he picked up his napkin and wiped at his face.

"I...beg your pardon," Motti gasped as he tried to get his cough under control. Padmé did her best not to smile, for she knew that Vader was responsible for the man's mishap.

"Get the Admiral a drink of water," Tarkin snapped at one of the serving droids, which scurried away at once.

"I'm fine," Motti said, trying to recover his dignity; a rather difficult task considering he'd dribbled red wine down the front of his tunic.

"So, Lady Vader," General Tagge said, deciding to deflect attention from his comrade, "what are Lord Vader's plans for the Empire? Do you think he plans on continuing with the status quo? Or does he plan on making changes?"

Padmé looked at the man, getting the impression that he was the only one there who had any real respect for her intelligence. “I can’t speak for him, General,” she replied. “I suppose in time he will make his intentions known to all,” she added with a knowing smile.

Tarkin didn’t like the sound of this, and gave Tagge a dirty look.

“Come now, General,” he said, forcing himself to smile. “This is a social affair. Let us not engage in political discussion. Lady Vader is clearly unable and unwilling to discuss the emperor’s plans. May I suggest that we back off of the issue?”

Tagge said no more, but it was clear by his expression that he didn’t appreciate being chastised publicly by Tarkin. Vader made a mental note of this, and it made him think yet again that Tagge may be turned into an ally yet.

Dinner dragged on for more than two hours, and Padmé found it exhausting to make small talk with the officers. With the exception of General Tagge, the men were condescending and, as the wine flowed more freely, even a little flirtatious with her. Vader was nearly at the end of his tether when his wife, perhaps sensing his anger, stood up.

“It’s been a long day,” she said as the men looked at her questioningly. “So if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to retire for the night.”

Tarkin stood up, followed by the other men. “Of course,” he said. “Allow me to escort you back to your quarters.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Padmé replied. “My guard can do that,” she added as Vader came to stand beside her.

Tarkin looked up at the large figure at her side and nodded, not wanting to question her. “Very well,” he said. “Goodnight then, Lady Vader.”

The other men wished her a goodnight as she made her way out of the dining room. Tarkin watched her leave, silently cursing the guard at her side for his most unwanted presence.

Vader and Padmé walked down the corridor in silence, knowing that there were surveillance cameras everywhere. Even on the lift they remained aloof of one another and kept their silence until they entered the quarters that had been assigned to Padmé.

Captain Rex stood up when he saw them enter. “Everything all right, Milady?” he asked.

Padmé nodded. “As much as can be expected,” she replied. “I hope you enjoyed your dinner more than I enjoyed mine,” she added, sitting down.

That bad, eh? Rex mused as he nodded in response. He looked up at Vader who was removing his mask and robe. “Any orders?” he asked, looking back at Padmé.

“Return to your post, Rex,” Vader told him. “Hopefully we’ll be back on board the *Exactor* by this time tomorrow.”

“Yes sir,” Rex replied, sharing his commander’s sentiment. ‘Goodnight sir,’ he added, and then turned to Padmé. “And to you, Milady.”

“Good night Captain,” Padmé replied.

Vader waited until Rex had departed before he joined his wife on the sofa. "That was brutal," he said. "I can't tell you how difficult it was not to knock their heads together, all of them."

Padmé smiled. "I know," she replied, reaching out and putting her hand on his shoulder. "But you didn't, and that says a lot about how much you've changed. One month ago you would have done just that. Your self restraint has improved tremendously, Ani."

Vader nodded. "I suppose it has," he agreed. "At least in some respects."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

Vader picked up her hand and kissed the underside of her wrist. "When it comes to you, I have no restraint at all," he told her.

"No?"

Vader shook his head. "None," he told her, kissing her again. "And when I saw the way that putrescence Tarkin was looking at you, and the thoughts in his head... it made me want to break every bone in his body."

"But you didn't," she reminded him, watching him as he pushed her sleeve upward to allow him greater access.

"No," he said between kisses. 'Only because it would have blown my cover,' he told her. He looked at her. "It makes me crazy to see any other man looking at you," he said, moving closer to her.

His possessiveness had always been challenging for Padmé to deal with; but if she were completely honest with herself, she would have to admit to being flattered and even a little turned on by it.

"You know no other man could ever capture my heart," she told him. "It's always been you, Anakin; only you."

Vader nodded, his eyes roving over her. "Just as you've always been the only woman I've ever wanted," he told her, running a finger along the side of her face. 'I knew from the moment I met you that you'd be mine, Padmé,' he continued, tracing his finger over her mouth. "And you always will be mine," he concluded, moving closer and capturing her mouth in a kiss. Vader poured all his pent up frustration and emotion into the kiss, and soon Padmé found herself being pushed backwards onto the sofa as Vader's hands moved down to the front of her gown.

Padmé knew that there would be no containing him in the mood he was in. Having spent the day watching Tarkin ogle her and reading his lurid thoughts, Vader felt compelled to claim her as his. And so she let him do so, loving the ardor with which he took her as his own.

Chapter 77

Seventy-seven

Coruscant

Obi-Wan Kenobi watched as Luke, Leia and their cousins splashed one another in the pool. In the short time he'd spent with the twins he'd grown very fond of both of them. Luke reminded him a great deal of Anakin at his age: sweet and innocent, but with a mischievous side that could not be contained. Leia not only looked like Padmé, but she was very much like her mother in her demeanour. Seeing them together made Obi-Wan consider that perhaps the decision to separate them at birth had been wrong, and he couldn't help but feel guilty for having had a part in it. There was no doubt in his mind that having Luke and Leia in his life had changed Vader. The Darkness that had twisted the once good man Obi-Wan had come to think of as his brother had been compromised by the love Vader had in his life now, the love of his children. What if he'd had them all along? Would the galaxy have been spared a decade of Vader's atrocities?

"Kids it's time to come upstairs for dinner," Sola said as she entered the pool deck.

"Great, I'm starved!" Luke declared, dog paddling over to the side of the pool.

Death Star

Vader woke up early the next morning, his wife nestled in his arms. He kissed her bare shoulder and then rolled away from her and off of the bed. Leaving Padmé alone to sleep, he pulled on his shorts and then made his way into the next room and sat down at the computer. There has to be a way, he thought with determination; and I won't stop until I find it.

Through reams of data Vader scanned, looking for something, anything that would help him destroy the behemoth space station. He had been working on a back up plan for the possibility that he would not find a flaw to exploit, and it was beginning to look as though he'd need it.

Padmé awoke alone, a feeling she'd certainly gotten used to, but one she had decided she hated. She rolled over to Vader's side of the bed, which was no longer warm. Clearly he had been up for a while. Getting out of bed, Padmé put her robe on and headed into the adjacent room where she found Vader busily working at the computer.

"When did you get up?" Padmé asked as she wrapped her arms around her husband's neck.

Vader looked over his shoulder. "A while ago," he told her. "I'm putting my back up plan into effect."

"Back up plan?" she asked, taking a seat beside him. "What is it?"

"Hold on a second," he said as he continued to work for a few more moments. 'That's it,' he said. He looked at her as he sat back in the chair for a moment. "I've changed the security

codes,” he told her. “Now the weapons array cannot be accessed except anyone but me,” he added with a smile.

Padmé lifted her eyebrows. “Impressive,” she said. “But we want to destroy it, Anakin, not just disable it,” she reminded him.

“I know,” he replied, leaning forward to the computer once more. “I’m still working on that.”

“You mean you don’t think there is way of destroying it?” she asked, disappointed.

“No, I don’t think that,” he replied, focusing his attention on the computer readouts once more. “I’m saying that I haven’t found it yet. I won’t stop until I do, Padmé. And you know how... determined I can be.”

Padmé smiled. “Only too well,” she replied. “I’m going to have a shower and get dressed. I’m sure I’ll be hearing from Tarkin soon.”

Vader frowned. “Yes, no doubt,” he grumbled.

Padmé stood up and kissed him on the cheek. “You’re so cute when you’re jealous,” she teased.

“I’m not cute!” he called after her as she left the room.

Elsewhere on the Death Star

Admiral Motti looked up from his breakfast as Tarkin sat down at the table with him. He could see at once that the governor was in a foul mood.

“Too much wine with dinner last night?” Motti asked with a smirk.

Tarkin’s frown deepened. “Don’t be an idiot,” he snapped.

“Well something has you in a foul mood,” Motti remarked. “Did the Lady Vader not appreciate your gallantry?” he asked sarcastically.

“The Lady Vader is playing me for a fool,” Tarkin replied.

Motti’s eyebrows shot up. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that she has somehow deactivated the listening devices I had planted in her room,” he said.

“The cameras too?” Motti asked.

Tarkin nodded as he took a drink of his caff.

“Pity,” Motti replied. “I know how much you were looking forward to watching her,” he remarked with a smile.

“That was not the reason I bugged her room,” Tarkin retorted. “And you damn well know it.”

Motti said nothing in reply, for he knew nothing of the kind. “So she didn’t want you spying on her,” he said. “How does that mean she’s playing you for a fool? She’s probably just creeped out that you’d want to watch her.”

"Is that it?" Tarkin asked pointedly. "Or is there some other reason?"

"Meaning what, exactly?" Motti asked.

"Meaning she is up to something," Tarkin asked. 'I've had a technician create a link to every computer system in that suite,' he told Motti. "She won't be able to replicate a cup of caff without me knowing it."

Motti nodded. "Brilliant," he replied. "Assuming of course she actually is up to no good. If she's not, and Vader finds out you invaded her privacy this way... well I don't need to tell you what he'll do."

"I'm not worried about Darth Vader, Conan," Tarkin replied smugly. "His wife has all but told us that he's a complete invalid now. I don't think we'll need to worry about him from now on."

Motti made no reply, for he was far from convinced that Darth Vader was out of the picture. He looked over as he saw a young man approaching their table, a look of concern on his face.

"Governor Tarkin, I have something to report, sir," the young man said.

Tarkin turned to him at once. "What is it?" he asked.

"It's the weapons array, sir," the man replied. "The security codes have been breached."

Padmé's quarters on the Death Star

"Ani, you need to take a break," Padmé said as she entered the room.

Vader looked up. "I think you're right," he said. "But I think I may be onto something," he told her.

"You mean you think you've found a way to destroy this thing?" she asked.

"Possibly," he said, standing up. 'I need to examine the schematics more closely,' he told her as he walked across to her. When he got to her he pulled her into his arms. "You smell wonderful," he said, nuzzling the side of her neck.

Padmé smiled. "Go have a shower," she told him. "Better make it a cold one."

"Okay, okay," he replied, releasing her. "I know when I'm not wanted."

Padmé laughed as he left the room to have a shower. She replicated a cup of caff and then went to the door.

"Good morning Captain," she said to Rex, who stood ever faithfully at his post.

"Good morning, Milady," he responded.

"I though you might like this," she said, handing him the cup.

"Thank you," he replied, taking the cup. "That's very kind of you."

"You've been up all night," she told him. "Go have a rest. The quarters across the corridor have been reserved for you and the other troops."

“But... how can I leave my post?” he asked, ever a stickler for orders.

“Don’t worry,” she told him. “Lord Vader is right in here with me. Now go on before you fall asleep on your feet.”

Rex smiled under his mask, the lady’s kindness never ceasing to amaze him. “Thank you, Milady,” he said. “I am a little tired.”

“I’m sure you are,” she replied. “Enjoy your rest.”

Rex bowed to her and then left for the quarters across the corridor, happy to have the chance to get some sleep. Padmé returned to the inside of her own quarters to replicate some breakfast.

Coruscant

“So what do you younglings have planned for tomorrow?” Obi-Wan asked as they ate dinner.

“I’m going to sleep in,” Luke declared.

“We’re going shopping,” Leia replied, looking at her cousins. “I can’t wait to show you two the shops!”

“Do you think your parents would approve of you being seen in public without them being home?” Sola asked.

Leia frowned. “But... it’s the mid term break!” she lamented. “We can’t just sit at home all week.”

“Your parents will be home before the week is over,” Sola pointed out. ‘At least, I expect them to be.’ She looked at Han. “No word yet?”

“Nope,” Han replied. ‘I suppose they’ve got their hands full right now. But don’t worry,’ he assured her. “Lord Vader won’t let anything happen. I’m sure he’s got things in complete control.”

Luke and Leia looked at one another, both of them hoping that he was right.

Death Star

Padmé set her cup of tea down on the table then looked at her wrist chrono. It was still early, but she felt certain that she would be hearing from Tarkin soon. I want to go home, she thought as she sat down. I miss Luke and Leia. She picked up her cup of tea and sipped at it, wishing her visit to the Death Star was far behind her. The door chime sounded and Padmé set down her cup. Great, she thought, wondering if she could stall the inevitable. The door sounded again, and she realized that he wasn’t going away. Judging that her husband would be out of the shower momentarily, Padmé answered the door, knowing that Tarkin would be suspicious if she delayed any longer.

“Good morning, Governor,” Padmé said with a smile.

“Good morning, your Majesty,” Tarkin replied. “I trust you passed a restful night.”

Padmé nodded. “Yes I did,” she replied. ‘I haven’t eaten breakfast yet,’ she told him, “so I’m not quite ready to resume our tour.”

“Oh, that’s not what I’m here for, Milady,” Tarkin replied, his expression devoid of expression.

Padmé began to grow alarmed by his demeanour, which was so different than it had been the previous night. “Oh? Why are you here, then?” she asked, assuming a less friendly stance.

Tarkin’s brows lowered. “Come now, Lady Vader,” Tarkin said, walking towards her. “I’m not an idiot. I know that you’ve been doing extensive searches on the station’s computer system.”

Padmé swallowed her panic. “So? I’m the emperor’s wife. I can search any computer system I wish.”

Tarkin smiled. “Come now, Milady,” he replied. “You and I both know that Lord Vader isn’t about to assume his...duties in the near future, if at all. And you may think that leaves you in charge, Milady, but it doesn’t.”

Padmé frowned. “How dare you speak to me in such a manner!” she said, backing away from him.

Tarkin’s smile grew at her outrage. “Oh, come now,” he said, approaching her slowly. “Let’s not play this game any longer, it’s become quite tiresome. You’re desperate, Lady Vader, admit it. You know that your tenuous grasp on the reins of power will slip away completely without this space station. Why else would you be searching the database for a way to gain control of it?”

“Don’t take another step,” she warned him.

“Or what?” he asked. “Your guards are not here, and I assure you I am not afraid of you, Lady Vader. Quite the contrary, actually. You’re a very beautiful woman. I’m sure we can work out a solution to this... predicament.”

His intentions began to dawn on Padmé, and her skin crawled at the thought of it. “You must be mad,” she said finally.

“No, I’m quite sane,” he said, running a finger down the side of her face. “And I can offer you a great deal, Milady. Far more than that pathetic cyborg Vader ever could. You’re far too beautiful to be wasting away for want of a real man.”

Padmé would listen to no more, and slapped him hard across the face. Tarkin was shocked by this, and took her roughly by the arm. “That wasn’t smart,” he told her. “For you see, my dear lady, you really have very few options. If you don’t want to be tried for treason, then you’ll cooperate.”

Padmé was about to reply when Tarkin went flying across the room to crash against the far wall. She turned quickly to see Vader standing in the doorway, his blue eyes yellow with Sith rage.

“Get in the bedroom, Padmé,” Vader told her as he watched Tarkin struggle to get to his feet. She didn’t argue, and retreated into the bedroom and closed the door behind her, knowing that what was about to transpire was bound to be ugly.

Tarkin shook his head to regain his senses, and stared at the man who was walking towards him with fury in his eyes. "Vader!" he cried.

"Surprised to see me, Governor?" Vader said as he slowly approached Tarkin. "Not quite who you were expecting, though, am I?" he asked.

"I... we can forge an alliance," Tarkin stammered desperately as Vader continued to close in on him. "You need me, Vader! You need this station!"

"You're right, I do need this station," Vader replied. "But I don't need you," he said, lifting one hand and squeezing Tarkin's larynx.

Tarkin's hands flew to his throat as his eyes bulged obscenely. "You'll... never get away with this!" he gasped.

Vader narrowed his eyes. "You dared to touch my wife," he growled, his eyes glowing yellow. "You dared to threaten her! That, Governor Tarkin, is a death sentence," he concluded with a final squeeze that snapped the man's neck. Vader tossed the body against the wall, the anger rippling through him like static electricity. He clenched his fists and closed his eyes in an effort to calm himself down, knowing that he couldn't go to his wife this way.

"Ani?"

Vader turned around to see Padmé standing in the doorway, her eyes on the body on the other side of the room.

"He crossed the line," he told her. "He needed to die."

Padmé nodded and then looked over at him. "He knew we were looking in the databank," she told him.

"I should have realized he would find out somehow," he replied as his eyes slowly returned to their natural hue. He walked over to her. "Are you all right?"

"Yes of course," she replied. "I'm just glad you came into the room when you did."

"So am I," he replied.

"Now what?" she asked.

Vader sighed, and rubbed a hand over his newly shaven chin. "Now it's time for the Empire to meet its new emperor," he told her. "Starting here, starting now."

"Are you sure?" she asked.

Vader nodded. "Yes, there's no other way now, Padmé. It's time."

This wasn't what she wanted to hear, but she was determined to support him nonetheless. "If this is what you think is best, then I'll be right there at your side, Ani. We're in this together."

Vader smiled. "I couldn't do it without you," he replied.

Chapter 78

Seventy-Eight

Death Star

General Tagge stepped onto the lift, fastening the top button of his tunic. *Who the devil calls a meeting at this hour?* He thought irritably. Tagge had begun to grow tired of Tarkin's increasingly irrational actions; this last minute, unplanned meeting being a prime example. He had been disgusted the previous evening by Tarkin's behaviour, by the way he had treated the empress. *If Lord Vader were to find out about the way he'd been looking at his wife, Tarkin's life expectancy would be drastically shortened*, he mused. Tagge wasn't sure what to believe about Vader, for the entire episode seemed exceedingly strange. *And now Vader's wife has assumed control of the Empire...*

"Good morning, General," Motti said as he stepped onto the lift.

"Morning," Tagge replied. "Do you have any idea what's going on?"

"I have some idea," Motti replied smugly.

Tagge frowned. "Oh? And what do you think you know?" he asked.

"I believe that the Governor has something to announce," Motti replied with a smug smile. "I think he has the Lady Vader right where he wants her."

"You don't know anything," Tagge retorted. "The empress is far too intelligent to fall for Tarkin's false flattery."

The smile faded from Motti's face. "I think you overestimate our lovely empress," he remarked. "And underestimate Governor Tarkin. Just wait; you'll see I'm right."

Tagge sighed, deciding that he needed a vacation.

The conference room was already half full when Tagge and Motti arrived. Tarkin, however, was not present, and this irked Tagge no end. *If he forces us to come to a bloody meeting he can at least have the decency to show up on time.*

The two officers took their seats and looked around expectantly, as indeed everyone else did, all waiting for Tarkin to arrive. But Tarkin did not arrive; instead the two royal guards entered the room, followed by the Lady Vader. She waited for the officers to stop talking, which happened rather quickly upon seeing her.

"Gentlemen," she said as she took a seat at the head of the table. "Governor Tarkin is dead."

The reaction to her words was, of course, quite strong and quite loud.

"What do you mean, he's dead?" Tagge demanded. "How? When?? What happened?"

"He threatened me," she replied calmly, "and made highly inappropriate propositions."

“And that was enough to kill him?” another officer asked incredulously.

“Yes, it was,” Vader spoke up. All heads turned to him, surprised to hear one of the normally silent guards enter into the conversation.

“And who gave you the authority to kill the commander of this space station?” Motti demanded.

Padmé looked over her shoulder, wondering how Vader would respond. He did so by removing the red mask and revealing his face to the gathered assembly. “I don’t need authority given to me,” he said. “I’m the emperor, and I can do whatever I want.”

The officers were too shocked for a moment to respond. And then they reacted.

“You’re not the emperor,” Motti declared. “Darth Vader is the emperor, and you, quite clearly, are *not* Darth Vader.”

Vader looked at Motti, the animosity that he felt for him filling him. “No?” he replied. ‘Who else do you know who can do this?’ he asked, lifting his hand squeezing two fingers together. At once Motti’s hands flew to his throat as he felt his larynx tightening. “Well?” Vader asked, walking over to Motti. “Who?” he demanded.

“No... one...” Motti gasped.

“No one what?” Vader barked, squeezing tighter.

“No...one... Lord Vader!” Motti gasped.

Vader smiled. “That’s more like it,” he said, watching the man as he gasped for breath. Finally Motti fell forward, dead. Silence had fallen upon the room as they witnessed the ghastly confrontation. Vader looked around at each of them in turn, trying to determine who else would be a problem. But each of the officers seated around the table were either terrified, shocked, or both. None seemed terribly sorry that Motti was dead, Vader was amused to remark. Finally he turned his attention to Tagge.

“I’m taking control of this station,” Vader said, taking a seat beside his wife. ‘I have changed the security codes so that I am the only person who can activate the weapons array. Any attempts to change this will result in immediate action. The clones are now under my control, and have been ordered to treat any measure of insubordination with extreme measures.’ He looked around the table. “Any questions?”

No one said a word, which pleased Vader immensely. He turned to his wife, whose face bore an inscrutable expression. *She hates violence*, Vader reflected; but *sometimes it’s necessary. She has to understand that.*

“General Tagge, I want to speak to you,” Vader said finally. “The rest of you, get out.”

At once all of the officers except for Tagge stood up and left the room, as Captain Rex stood by to expedite their departure.

Tagge watched nervously as his comrades left the room, wondering if he would be the next casualty in Vader’s new order. Finally he was alone with the royal couple and their steadfast guard, who had now removed his helmet to reveal that he was a clone.

“Tell me, General,” Vader began, “what was your opinion of the late Governor Tarkin?” he asked.

Tagge was rather surprised by the question, too much so to be able to hide his true feelings from both his expression and his mind. “I...can’t say that I liked the man,” he began. “He was arrogant and a complete control freak. But he was the commander of this station, and I respected him as such.”

Vader nodded, knowing the man was being completely honest. “I’m putting *you* in command of this station, Tagge,” he said finally. “You’re an intelligent man, one of the few I’ve encountered in a long time.”

“Thank you,” Tagge replied, stunned by the turn of events.

“Motti was in league with Tarkin,” Vader continued. “He couldn’t be trusted. But you — you hated him. I can see it in your mind. You’re not sorry he’s dead.”

Tagge knew it was pointless to deny anything at this point. “You’re right,” he admitted. ‘Tarkin was conceited and egotistical,’ he continued. “He had delusions of grandeur that I wanted no part of. Even before the late emperor died he was planning on using this station to take control of the Empire.”

“Power is very dangerous in the hands of the corrupt,” Padmé commented at this point.

“Indeed it is, Milady,” Tagge replied. “But I can assure you both that I have no such delusions. I know my role in the Empire, and it’s not to rule. I leave that to those more capable and more qualified than me.”

“Wise of you, General,” Vader commented. “Very wise.”

“Will you be remaining here, sir?” Tagge asked.

“No,” Vader replied. ‘I have a lot to do, and we are anxious to see our children,’ he added, looking at Padmé. “Captain Rex will remain here with you to act as my liaison until I find a suitable officer for the job.”

Tagge nodded in understanding. “Of course, sir,” he replied. “Any orders?”

“Just get this damn thing finished,” Vader said. “That’s all I want right now.”

Tagge smiled. “I think I can promise you that will happen quickly sir,” he replied. “You have my personal guarantee.”

Vader and Padmé left the conference room, leaving Rex behind to get acquainted with his temporary commanding officer. Padmé was quiet as they walked along, and Vader could see that there was something troubling her. However he said nothing until they stepped onto the lift alone.

“What are you doing?” she asked as he activated the lift’s brake.

“I want to talk to you,” he replied. “And I don’t want to be interrupted.”

Padmé looked away. “Can’t this wait? I want to see Luke and Leia.”

"No, I don't think it can," he replied, watching her closely. "What is bothering you? And don't tell me it's nothing because I know better."

Padmé said nothing for a moment, as she tried to formulate her reply in a way that would not lead to a fight. "I hate violence," she told him simply. "You know that."

Vader nodded. "Yes, I know," he replied. "But sometimes it's necessary. Tarkin deserved to die for the way he was talking to you, wouldn't you agree?"

"Perhaps," she replied.

"And as for Motti," Vader continued, "he was in Tarkin's back pocket. He couldn't be trusted. Besides that, I needed to show these men that I'm in charge, and that I mean business."

"Oh I think you did just that," she replied tersely.

Vader frowned. "What would you have me do? Let his challenge go unanswered?"

"I didn't say that," she said. "I just thought killing him was a little extreme," she added, activating the lift again.

Vader watched her, knowing there was more to it, but deciding to wait for now to get into it with her.

Coruscant

Luke and Leia had just gone to bed when Han Solo entered the office to check the messages. He was checking through a rather lengthy list when a communiqué came through from the Death Star. Han activated the transmission and was surprised to see the face of Darth Vader.

"Good evening Milord," Han said. "How are things going?"

"Well, good I suppose," Vader replied, looking away for a moment at what Han presumed was his wife. "Tarkin is dead, and I've assumed control of the station."

Han tried to hide his surprise. "Oh, that's good," he replied. "Will you be staying there?"

"No," Vader replied. "I've put General Tagge in charge. He's the only one with an ounce of intelligence or integrity in the entire station. Padmé and I are preparing to leave the Death Star right now. Expect us tomorrow some time."

Han nodded. "The kids will be glad to hear it," he replied.

"How have things been there?" Vader asked.

"Good," Han replied. "They've had a blast with their cousins."

"I'm sure," Vader replied. "I'd better give Padmé a hand. Until tomorrow."

"Until tomorrow, sir," Han replied and then ended the transmission. Han stood up, unable to shake the feeling that all was not well between Lord and Lady Vader.

Star Destroyer Exactor

“Welcome aboard, your majesties,” Captain Piett said as Vader and Padmé descended the shuttle ramp. Piett had been as surprised as Han to learn of the unexpected turn of events that had taken place on the Death Star. But he decided that Lord Vader knew what he was doing, and so he’d simply taken things in his stride.

“Take us home, Piett,” Vader said as he took his wife’s hand. “Maximum speed.”

“It will be my pleasure, sir,” Piett replied with a bow, and then left the hangar.

The ride in the lift seemed longer than normal as Padmé said very little to her husband. Vader wanted to continue their discussion, but the presence of a clone prevented him from doing so.

“I can’t wait to see the twins,” Vader said finally, trying to draw his wife out of her shell. “I told Han to expect us tomorrow sometime,” Vader told her.

Padmé nodded her understanding. “It will be good to be home,” she said as they stepped off of the lift.

“The first thing I’m going to do when we get there is dismantle that hyperbaric chamber,” he told her with a smile.

Padmé smiled a little in response. “I’ll help,” she offered.

The clone that was carrying their bags stopped ahead of them at the doorway of Padmé’s quarters, and waited for permission to enter the suite. Vader and Padmé followed the clone into the quarters and watched as he set them down and then leave the room.

“I suppose the twins are asleep,” Padmé said, looking at her wrist chrono. ‘I was hoping to talk to them.’

“You’ll see them tomorrow,” he assured her.

“Yes, I suppose,” she agreed.

Vader watched her as she picked up her bag and headed into the bedroom. He followed her and watched for a moment as she started to take the remainder of her clothing out of the closet, folding each garment meticulously before placing it carefully in her bag.

“Talk to me, Angel,” Vader said, sitting down on the end of the bed.

Padmé glanced up at him. “What do you mean? I’m talking to you.”

Vader took the blouse in her hands away from her. “You know what I mean,” he challenged. “You’re still upset.”

Padmé said nothing, neither denying nor affirming what he’d said. Vader reached over and lifted her chin so that her eyes met his.

“What do you want me to say?” she asked. “You know how I feel, Anakin. I hate violence. I hate the Death Star.”

“So do I,” he told her.

“Then why aren’t you destroying it?” she asked him, her large dark eyes full of concern. “You said you’d found a way; why aren’t you using it??”

"I said I thought I might be onto something," Vader corrected her.

"Okay, so you should pursue that," she told him. "You can't just give up, Ani!" "Padmé, it's not that easy," he told her. "The Death Star is a huge station, there are hundreds of thousands of men on board," he began.

"I know that," she replied. "But..."

"Padmé, think of it," he said. "What better way to keep control of the galaxy? What better way to eliminate the instability that has been plaguing the galaxy for so long?"

Padmé frowned. "I don't believe you!" she replied. "Are you seriously considering using that monstrosity?"

"No! I mean, I don't plan on destroying planets, if that's what you mean," he replied. "I've taken them off line, remember?"

"So what's the point of it all, then?" she asked.

"No one knows that the weapons are disabled," he told her. "The threat alone will be enough to keep order."

Padmé sighed, her eyes still troubled. "I don't know," she said, shaking her head. "I'm afraid, Ani."

"Why? What are you afraid of?" he asked, reaching out and taking her hands.

"I'm afraid of what all that power will do to you," she told him, not sugar coating how she felt at all. "You've changed so much in the past few months, Anakin. I don't know if you're even aware of how much you've changed. But you saw what being in control of the Death Star did to Tarkin. I just don't want to see that happen to you."

Vader stood up off the bed. "I am *not* Tarkin," he assured her.

"I know that," she replied.

"And I promise you that I will not let the power corrupt me," he told her, running his hands up her arms. "I have too much in my life to lose to ever allow that to happen. Besides, you'd never let me get away with it," he teased.

Padmé shook her head. "No, I wouldn't," she agreed.

"So have faith in me, Angel," he told her, reaching up to take her face in his hands. "I'm not about to do anything that would jeopardize my relationship with you. You and the twins mean more to me than any amount of power."

Padmé looked up into his eyes, seeing, for the first time since they'd departed for the Death Star, the Anakin Skywalker she knew was growing stronger each day. "I hope you mean that," she told him.

"Of course I mean it," he replied, drawing her closer. "I lost you once, Padmé," he said. "I'm never going to make that mistake again," he assured her. "My life was meaningless without you," he told her, bringing his lips to her neck and grazing them over it slowly.

“Anakin, we’re not finished talking about this,” she told him, knowing what he was trying to do.

“No?” he asked, kissing her neck slowly now, knowing exactly what to do to lower her defences completely.

“You’re trying to distract me,” she said, using the very same words he’d used the previous day when she’d seduced him.

“Something you know a little about,” he replied, kissing her in the spot he knew would reduce her to putty in his hands.

“Ani,” she sighed, “that’s not fair.”

“Was it fair when you did it to me yesterday?” he asked, reaching behind her to unfasten her gown.

Padmé smiled. “Touché,” she replied at last, knowing he’d won.

Vader smiled, knowing it too.

Chapter 79

Seventy-nine

Padmé awoke the next morning with her husband's arm draped over her. She smiled as she recalled how many mornings she'd woken up this way. And yet, there was a part of her that felt some anxiety about the previous night. At the time she had teased Vader about how he'd distracted her by seducing her; but now that the heat of the moment had passed, she had to wonder if she'd been wise to give in to him the way she had. The fact that he intended on keeping the Death Star bothered Padmé tremendously, something she had been trying to explain to Vader when he'd side-tracked her. *But be honest, Padmé*, she told herself; *when have you ever been able to resist him?* He had always had the ability to wear down her defences, even convincing her to marry him when they were going against every convention in the galaxy to do it. *But this is different*, she reminded herself. *I'm not going to let this go*, Ani, she thought, looking at his sleeping face. *You may have won the battle, but the war isn't over.*

Deciding it was too early to get up, Padmé rolled over and closed her eyes. She had almost drifted off when she felt Vader remove his arm from her and roll away. Her eyes opened when he got out of the bed.

"Ani? Where are you going?" she asked sleepily.

"To the bridge," he told her. "I just want to check in. Besides, the men haven't seen me since the surgery," he added. "I thought I'd satisfy their curiosity."

Padmé smiled. "They'll be thrilled," she said.

Vader nodded, not quite sure if *thrilled* was the best word. "I won't be long," he told her as he headed for the fresher. Padmé rolled over in the bed and promptly fell back asleep.

On the lift up to the bridge, Vader amused himself with the various reactions from the crew. No one knew he who he was, but no one had questioned him about his identity. And while this served his immediate purposes, he made a mental note to reprimand the crew on their slackness.

Captain Piett, who had already seen Vader since his transformation, greeted him when he arrived on the bridge. "Good morning sir," he said. "I trust you had a good rest."

Vader nodded, looking around at the crewmen who were watching him with mild curiosity. "I thought it was about time that the men saw my face," he told Piett, who nodded in understanding. "Emperor on the bridge!" he said in a loud voice, drawing attention to Vader. The men immediately stood up and, after a moment of astonished silence as they checked out their new commander, burst into applause.

Vader was surprised by their reaction. At one time he would have soundly reprimanded them for such an outburst, for such a breach of protocol. But this was a special occasion.

"It seems the men approve of the surgeons' work," Piett commented with a smile.

Vader nodded. "Yes, so it seems," he replied. "What is our ETA to Coruscant?" he asked as the men returned to their posts.

Piett checked a nearby navi-computer. "We're about to revert to sub light," he reported. "So we ought to be at the capital within the hour, sir."

"Excellent," Vader replied. "It will be good to be home," he added.

Piett nodded in response, amazed by the change that had come over Vader. It seemed that his transformation was more than skin deep. "I'm sure the prince and princess will be excited to see you and the empress return home," he commented.

"Yes, I'm sure they will," Vader replied. "I'm going to contact Solo and let him know to expect us," he said. "You have the bridge, Captain."

"Yes sir," Piett replied, and then watched as Vader left the bridge. As he did so, the crewmen started talking amongst themselves, all of them expressing their surprise at the new and improved Darth Vader.

"As you were," Piett reprimanded them sternly. And at once the men fell silent and returned to their tasks.

Padmé was just waking up when Vader entered their bedroom. She stretched in the bed as she watched him come over and sit on the edge of the bed beside her.

"Good morning," he said, leaning over and kissing her. "Again."

Padmé smiled. "Good morning," she said. "I didn't realize how tired I was."

Vader nodded. "I wore you out last night I guess," he told her with a smile.

"Well, three times in one night is a little tiring," she replied.

Vader's smile grew. "You didn't seem to mind at the time," he told her.

"I didn't," she replied at once. "It's wonderful to be able to be spontaneous again," she told him.

Vader nodded. "There is something to be said for spontaneity," he agreed. "As much as I enjoyed our times together before the surgery, it always frustrated me that I couldn't perform as often as you would have liked."

Padmé lifted her eyebrows. "Is that what you think?" she asked.

Vader nodded. "You were afraid of compromising my health," he told her.

"Yes," she conceded. "But that doesn't mean I was left wanting," she assured him with a smile.

"Well, I did do my best to satisfy," he told her with a smile.

"And you did," she replied. "Each and every time."

Vader nodded, growing turned on by the turn in the conversation. "And last night?" he asked.

Padmé smiled. "Do you really need to ask?" she replied.

Vader laughed. "Well, no," he replied. "You made it quite clear how satisfied you were," he teased as he reclined on the bed beside her.

Padmé felt her face growing warm. It was clear that the physical changes in Vader had also created a healthy boost to his ego as well. "Ani," she said. "You're so mean to tease me."

His smile only grew. "I know," he said. "You're so much fun to tease, though," he said, reaching over and running a finger down the side of her face.

Padmé recognized the look in his eyes and it made her heart beat faster. Was she a fool to even try to resist him when she wanted him as much as he wanted her?

Vader watched her, sensing that, for some reason, she felt some reticence. He was at a loss to know why she felt that way, and decided he would make up her mind for her before she had a chance to.

"Piett told me that we'd be arriving at Coruscant in an hour or so," he told her, drawing his finger down her neck slowly, watching it as it descended lower.

Padmé nodded. "I can't wait," she said. "Perhaps we ought to let Han know to expect us," she suggested.

Vader nodded, remembering that he had meant to do just that upon returning to their quarters. "Yes, I suppose I should," he said, sitting up.

"I'll have a shower while you're doing that," she said, getting up out of the bed. She headed for the fresher, amazed and a little disappointed to have managed to sidetrack Vader.

Padmé undressed and then brushed out her hair. Next she turned on the water and waited a moment or two to allow it to get hot. Stepping into the shower, she let her hair get wet and then shampooed it, closing her eyes as the hot water relaxed her. She had just rinsed her hair when she heard the shower door open. Padmé opened her eyes and smiled as she watched her husband step into the shower stall with her.

"You don't mind, do you?" he asked with a smile.

Padmé was quite certain that even if she did it wouldn't make a difference. "Not at all," she replied.

"Good," he said, moving over to her at once...

Vader left the fresher later in time to hear his comlink go off. He activated it at once, and was reminded by a rather annoying droid voice that he was scheduled for a check up in the medical bay. Realizing that he was late, Vader finished getting dressed and then left the quarters.

Word had spread quickly about Vader's transformation, and the crewmen who passed him in the corridors nodded respectfully in his direction. Vader had to keep from smiling, for he wanted to maintain his image even though he no longer wore a mask. *Guess that means I can't roll my eyes during meetings any more*, he reflected as he stepped onto a lift. *But I'm the emperor*, he mused with a smile; *I can do whatever I damn well please...*

"Good morning Lord Vader," the young medic said as Vader entered the medical bay.

Vader merely nodded in response, having become accustomed not to being terribly sociable. "I'm fine," he told her. "Is this really necessary?"

The medic smiled nervously. "I'm afraid so, sir," she replied. "It's not every day that a person undergoes such an enormous physical transformation as you have," she reminded him.

"Very well," Vader replied. "Make it quick, though. I'm anxious to see my children."

"I'm sure you are," she replied. "Now please, have a seat," she told him as she led him into an examination room.

Vader sat down on a stool that she indicated and waited expectantly.

"Sir, could you remove your shirt?" she asked.

Vader complied at once, being able to do so pleasing him immensely.

"Well, let's see now," the medic said, running her diagnostic tool over Vader's chest. 'Your lungs and heart look fantastic,' she said, looking at the device's screen. "Any problems?"

"No, none," Vader told her.

"Excellent," she said, walking around behind him. She stopped when she saw the rather prominent nail marks on Vader's shoulders. 'How did you...?' she began to ask, and then realized where they had come from. "Never mind," she mumbled as she continued with her examination. Vader merely smiled.

Coruscant, a short time later

"Dad!! Mom!!"

Padmé and Vader smiled as the twins came barreling down the corridor at them full speed. Padmé was the first to greet them, hugging and kissing them each. Luke and Leia laughed as their father greeted them next by picking both of them up together in a giant bear hug.

"Look at all your hair, Daddy!" Leia said, running her hand over her father's spiky hair.

Vader smiled. "It's coming along," he told her.

"It's the exact same color as mine," Luke commented proudly.

"It sure is," Padmé agreed. "Just as your eyes are the same shade of blue."

"Did you find a way to destroy the Death Star?" Leia asked her parents as they started down the corridor.

Padmé looked up at Vader, and he could see that the issue was far from being resolved between them.

"Let's go inside and talk about it," Vader suggested, averting the girl's question.

His deflection didn't go unnoticed by his wife, who simply followed along as they went to find Sola and Obi-Wan. *We'll discuss this later, Anakin*, she thought resolutely. *The issue hasn't been laid to rest yet.*

Chapter 80

Eighty

Coruscant

Luke and Leia took turns bending their parents' ears over dinner, both of them eager to fill their parents in on everything that had transpired since they'd last seen one another. Vader and Padmé listened patiently, amused by their children's enthusiasm and excitement.

"Sounds like you've had a lot of fun," Padmé commented, smiling at her sister.

Sola nodded. "Of course, the girls wanted to go shopping," she said. "But Commander Solo didn't think you would want Leia to go out in public without you being here."

"He's right," Vader replied, looking at Leia. "And Leia knows it."

Leia sighed. "I didn't go, Daddy," she reminded him. "As much as I wanted to," she added glumly.

Vader had to suppress a smile at his daughter's melodramatic performance. "Well, perhaps there's a way we can make up for all the suffering you've been through," he quipped.

"What do you mean, Dad?" Luke asked.

"How many days do you have left of your midterm break?" Vader asked.

"Five days including the weekend," Leia replied at once. "Why?"

Vader glanced at Padmé with a smile. "I just thought that perhaps you'd like to spend it on Naboo," he told the twins. "We could bring your Aunt Sola and cousins home and stay on for a few days."

Luke and Leia both gave a whoop of delight upon hearing this, and jumped out of their chairs to tackle their father.

Vader laughed as they hugged him. "I take it that's a yes," he quipped.

Padmé smiled, as surprised as the twins by his suggestion.

"I think that's a wonderful idea," Sola remarked.

"Is Han... I mean Commander Solo going to come too?" Pooja asked hopefully.

"No," Vader replied, amused by his niece's obvious affection for Han. 'I think he's earned a few days off.' He looked at Obi-Wan next, who had been quietly observing Vader all this time. "And what about you, Obi-Wan?" he asked. "Do you need a break from baby-sitting duty as well?" he asked with a smile.

Obi-Wan returned the smile. "I have enjoyed getting to know Luke and Leia very much," he replied. "But I'm not as young as I used to be," he hastened to add.

Vader laughed. "Does that mean you need a break?"

Obi-Wan nodded, stroking his beard thoughtfully as he considered what he wanted to say next. "I was considering the idea of going to see Master Yoda," he asked, watching Vader carefully for his reaction.

"He's still alive?" Padmé asked.

Obi-Wan nodded. "Yes he is," he replied. "I was going to suggest that perhaps we might begin to make plans to rebuild the Jedi Order."

Vader was surprised by Obi-Wan's comment, and said nothing in reply for a moment. The thought of the Jedi and their destruction filled him with a sense of anxiety that he wasn't ready to deal with.

Obi-Wan sensed Vader's anxiety, and it gave him hope. And yet, he could see that there was a very large part of Vader that resisted the thought of acknowledging his Jedi roots, and, more immediately, the part he'd had in the destruction of the Jedi Order.

"I need to let Pielt know of our plans," Vader said suddenly, standing up from the table. "Excuse me," he said to his wife and then left the table. No one said anything for a moment, for all were surprised by his sudden change in demeanor. And then Padmé spoke.

"Do you think it was wise to mention your plans to him, Obi-Wan?" she asked. "He's still very much a Sith, after all."

Obi-Wan nodded. "I know, Padmé," he replied. "But I also know that the darkness in him has been compromised by all that has happened, by all that he has learned about his former master. I'm hoping that if he's given a chance to make up for the past he will take it, and that will help him return to the light."

"And if he doesn't?" Sola asked. "What if he wants no part of the Jedi? What if he still considers the Jedi to be his enemy?"

Sola's words were met with silence around the table, for no one wanted to consider that possibility.

"I would suggest that if Vader does not return to the light, then there's no hope for the galaxy whatsoever," Obi-Wan said finally.

"There *is* hope, Master Obi-Wan," Luke averred. "Our father has changed a lot since we first met him, hasn't he, Leia?"

Leia nodded emphatically. "Yes he has," she agreed.

"He still has a long way to go," Padmé spoke up. "But the twins are right; he *has* changed. I only hope your plan works, Obi-Wan. Because he has no intention of destroying the Death Star."

"What?" Obi-Wan cried. "You can't be serious!"

Padmé sighed. "I wish I weren't," she replied. "But he seems to think that it will enable him to stabilize the galaxy. I'm afraid of what being in control of that much power will do to him."

Obi-Wan frowned, upset that he hadn't known this earlier. "We can only hope history won't repeat itself, Padmé," he replied. 'And that having you and the younglings in his life will keep him from slipping.' He stood up at this point. "If you'll excuse me, ladies," he said.

Padmé nodded, and watched him leave the room. Then she turned back to Luke and Leia. "Why don't you two go and start packing?" she suggested. "I'd like to leave for Naboo as soon as we can."

"Sounds good to me!" Luke declared, and got up at once, followed by his twin.

"I guess we ought to do the same," Pooja said as Luke and Leia left the room.

"Good idea," Sola replied, and the girls both left the room to pack.

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate you looking after Luke and Leia for me," Padmé said to Sola.

Sola smiled. "It's been my pleasure," she replied. "I've really enjoyed getting to know them. They're wonderful children. You should be very proud."

Padmé smiled. "I am, Sola," she replied. "Very proud. I just wish Mom and Dad had lived to meet them."

Sola nodded. "I know they would have loved them," she replied.

Padmé sighed, the thought of her parents making her melancholy. "I miss them still," she admitted. "Even after all this time."

"I know," Sola replied. "So do I."

Obi-Wan had no trouble finding Vader, for their connection through the Force was still strong.

"Everything all right, Anakin?"

Vader looked up from the computer screen where he'd just ended a communication with Captain Piett.

"Yes," he replied, standing up. "The *Exactor* will be ready to leave orbit in a couple of hours," he continued, as he walked over to the window.

Obi-Wan nodded in understanding. "That wasn't what I was referring to," he said. "And I'm certain you know it."

Vader stood at the window looking outside at the darkening sky. He said nothing in response. Obi-Wan walked over to him, knowing how reluctant Vader was to get into this, but feeling strongly that this conversation was long overdue.

"Padmé tells me that you've assumed control of the Death Star," Obi-Wan said at last, looking outside as well.

Vader could sense Obi-Wan's scrutiny and kept his response in check. "I'm the emperor," he replied finally. "Who better to control it?"

"I suppose that depends on the sort of emperor you plan on being," Obi-Wan commented. "Besides, I thought the plan was to find a way to destroy it?"

Vader looked at him. "I changed my mind," he said simply in response.

"Clearly," Obi-Wan responded. He was beginning to feel as though he was walking in a mine field, choosing each word carefully to prevent an explosion. *To hell with that*, he decided resolutely; *I have things that need to be said. He has no choice but to hear them.*

"So tell me, Anakin," Obi-Wan continued, deciding to put it all on the table. "What are you plans?"

Vader lifted an eyebrow. "You know my plans," he replied. "You were there when I told the kids I wanted to take them to Naboo."

"I don't mean those plans," Obi-Wan replied, frustrated by Vader's evasiveness. 'I mean *your* plans,' he persisted. "As in, what can the galaxy expect from its new emperor? The Hero with No Fear, champion of democracy I once knew you to be? Or another Palpatine?"

"I am *not* Palpatine!" Vader retorted hotly. "I killed him, remember?"

Obi-Wan nodded. "Yes, I was there," he replied. "But if you're planning on using the Death Star as he intended it to be used, then I have to wonder how different you'll be from him."

Vader frowned, not liking the implication Obi-Wan was making. "I have no intention of using it as he had intended," he snapped back. "I don't plan on blowing up planets if that's what you're implying."

"Then why keep it at all?" Obi-Wan asked calmly. "Unless it's purely for the power of knowing that you could do just that."

"You don't know what the hell you're talking about, old man," Vader retorted.

"No?" Obi-Wan challenged. "I think I do. Moreover, I think I'm correct, only you don't want to hear it."

"What? What don't I want to hear?" Vader challenged. "Just come right out and say it, Obi-Wan."

"Very well," Obi-Wan replied. 'I will. You don't want to acknowledge that you're in danger of letting all that power undo the progress you've made in the past six months,' he continued. "You don't want to face the fact that you're acting like you did on Mustafar, and that if you continue this way you will lose Padmé and the twins all over again."

His words angered Vader greatly. "I will *not* lose them again, do you hear me?" he shouted. "Who do you think you are talking to me this way? You're not my master any more, Obi-Wan. I'm not your pupil."

"I know that," Obi-Wan replied, ignoring the anger he felt emanating from Vader. 'I'm talking to you as a friend, Anakin.' He turned and looked out the window, a crease furrowing his brow. "I let you down once, Anakin," he continued. "And I've never forgiven myself for that. I'm not going to do that again. So like it or not, I intend on being your mentor, your conscience, if you will. That's the only way I can be sure you won't make a mess of things again, Anakin."

Vader was so shocked by Obi-Wan's candor that he had no ready answer. And then he shook his head in astonishment. "You really have a lot of nerve, you know that old man?"

Obi-Wan smiled. "Well I had to put up with you for a great number of years," he retorted. "I learned to develop a thick hide."

Vader couldn't help but smile. It was actually refreshing to have someone speak to him honestly and not kiss his behind for a change. "So you're going to be my conscience, are you?" he asked, folding his arms over his chest.

"Yes," Obi-Wan replied. "That is my intention."

"Am I interrupting something?"

Both men turned to see Padmé standing in the doorway.

"No, not at all," Vader told her. He looked at Obi-Wan. "Just a friendly chat between friends," he added.

Padmé wasn't certain what had transpired between the two men, but felt hopeful that the good feelings she sensed between them was a sign of things to come. "The kids are getting packed," she told her husband. "Maybe we ought to do the same," she suggested.

Vader nodded, agreeing with her even though he had nothing to pack. "I'm coming," he told her. "Pielt is expecting us soon."

"We'll be ready," she told him. She looked at Obi-Wan and smiled, telling him silently how much his presence in Vader's life meant to her. And then she left the room.

"You're a very lucky man, Anakin Skywalker," Obi-Wan told him. "Don't ever forget that."

"I know I am," Vader agreed. "Believe me, I know."

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"I'm done," Luke announced, dumping his haversack on the floor of his sister's bedroom.

Leia, who was meticulously folding a pair of trousers, looked at the rumpled looking bag, feeling certain that the clothes inside were equally rumpled. "How can you have packed so quickly?" she asked, looking at him with a frown. "What did you do? Just throw everything into a bag?"

Luke shrugged. "Well... yeah," he admitted. "Is there something wrong with that?"

Leia rolled her eyes. "What do you think your clothes are going to look like when you take them out, Luke?"

"Who cares?" he replied, flopping down on Leia's bed. 'It's not like we have to go to school while we're there. I can wear my pajamas all day if I want,' he said, seeing that he was getting his sister's goat. "In fact, I might just do that. Or... maybe I'll sit around in my *underwear* all day," he continued. "And... and maybe I won't even change them!"

Leia placed her trousers carefully into her bag and then looked up at her brother with a sigh. "I wonder if there was a mistake," she mused thoughtfully.

"A mistake?" Luke asked. "What are you talking about?"

"I wonder if there's any way we got mixed up at the hospital when we were born," she said, a hint of a mischievous smile on her face.

Luke opened his mouth to protest, when his sister tossed a cushion square into his face, and then calmly continued with her packing.

Chapter 81

Eighty-one

Star Destroyer Exactor

It was very late by the time Padmé was able to get Luke and Leia settled down enough to fall sleep. With Vader on the bridge, she was left to deal with the twins and their highly excited state. Sola had offered to help, but Padmé declined the offer, realizing that her sister could no doubt use a break from babysitting.

"Is there anything I can do for you before I shut down for the night, Milady?" Threepio asked Padmé as she sat down in the living area of the quarters.

Padmé thought for a moment. "A cup of tea would be nice," she replied. "Thanks, Threepio."

The droid hustled off to do his mistress' bidding as Padmé sat back on the sofa, suddenly realizing how tired she was. *You hardly slept last night*, she reminded herself. *Is it any wonder you're so tired?* Padmé smiled as she thought back to the previous night, of how insatiable her husband had been. Being freed from the suit had changed Vader in a myriad of ways, not the least of which was his sexual appetite. For even though they had been lovers while he was confined to the suit, Padmé had always felt that he was self-conscious about his body, as well as his lack of stamina. And now he was making up for it in a big way. *If we keep up this way I'll be pregnant again in no time*, she mused.

"Here you are, Milady," Threepio said, handing Padmé a steaming cup of tea.

"Thank you," she replied. "Goodnight, Threepio."

"Goodnight Milady," Threepio replied, and toddled out of the room to find his counterpart.

Padmé had barely taken a sip from her tea when Vader returned to the quarters. She looked up at him with a smile.

"Everything under control?" she asked.

"Yes," he told her, sitting down beside her. "We should be arriving at Naboo by dawn," he told her.

"Good," she said.

"Kids asleep?" he asked.

"Yes, finally," she replied. "They were so excited it took every trick in the book to get them settled down," she told him with a smile.

Vader smiled. "I can imagine," he replied.

"This will be their first visit to Naboo," she commented. 'I can't wait to show them the Lake District.' A look of sadness passed over her face. "I only wish my parents were still

alive,” she said softly. “They would have adored Luke and Leia.”

“I’m sure my mother would have too,” he replied. “You know, I still dream about her,” he told her.

Padmé nodded. “You were very close to her,” she reminded him. “It’s natural that you would.”

Vader nodded. “I can’t tell you how many times I dreamed about you over the past ten years,” he told her. “It was like torture when I would wake up and realize that you were gone.”

Padmé said nothing in response, but reached over and touched his face. “I’m not gone,” she reminded him. “We’re together now, Ani, just as we were meant to be.”

Vader looked at her, the thought of losing her again like a painful constriction in his chest. “I couldn’t bear to lose you again, Angel,” he said quietly. “I...I don’t know how I lived for ten years without you.”

Padmé’s eyes grew misty at his words. “You won’t lose me, Ani,” she told him. “We belong together, we always have.”

Vader nodded in agreement, taking her hand and kissing the underside of her wrist.

“Let’s go to bed,” she said. “I need you, Anakin.”

Vader didn’t need to be asked twice. Standing up, he pulled her to her feet and then took her hand as they headed towards their bedroom.

“Gather your men and come with me at once,” the young Sith lord said. “We’re going to the Jedi Temple.”

“What are your orders sir?” Commander Blye asked.

“Kill them,” Darth Vader told him. “All of them.”

“Yes sir,” Blye replied.

Transports lifted off, following the Jedi fighter who led the squadron across the darkening city to the Jedi Temple. Vader disembarked and walked to the bottom of the enormous staircase. He waited for the squadron of clones, pulling his hood up as he did so. And then he started up the stairs, with five hundred clones behind him, blasters at the ready.

As soon as they entered the building, the carnage began. With lightsaber flashing, Vader killed every living being that crossed his path. Ignoring their pleas for mercy, he slashed viciously, leaving no one alive.

“Master Skywalker, what are we going to do?” a 4 year old youngling asked, peeking out from behind one of the chairs in the Jedi Council room. “There are so many of them!”

Vader looked down at the boy, not a moment of indecision staying his hand as he raised his weapon and felled the boy with one slash of his deadly blade. Next was the nursery...

Vader woke up at this point, his eyes snapping open. His heart was pounding hard, the visions of his nightmare filling him with a sense of cold dread. It had been years since he’d

thought of that night. For ten years he had merely thought of it as one vital step to the betterment of the galaxy: destroying the enemy, the Jedi Order. But now... now he wasn't sure who the real enemy was. His entire belief system had been ripped apart when he'd come to realize how Palpatine had used him. And that realization was making him question everything else that he had believed, including his part in the destruction of the Jedi Order.

"Ani? Are you okay?"

Vader turned to his wife. "I had a bad dream," he told her simply.

Padmé frowned and reached out to touch his face. "You're shaking," she told him.

"Am I?" he asked.

Padmé nodded, and wrapped her arms around him, nestling close to him. "What did you dream?" she asked. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," Vader told her, closing his eyes and drinking in the scent of her hair. "I don't."

Padmé grew concerned by the trembling of his body in her arms, by the pounding of his heart within his chest. Whatever it was he had dreamed it obviously had shaken him deeply. "I'm sorry," she told him, kissing his chest softly.

Vader willed himself to relax, forcing the images of his dream from his mind. What she was doing helped him do just that. Padmé continued to kiss his chest, growing excited as she moved over Vader's taut pectoral muscles. The powerful perfection of his body had always been a tremendous turn on to her; tonight was no exception. She glanced up at him in the dark, wondering if she ought to take things to the next level. *It would certainly take his mind off of his nightmare*, she reasoned, deciding to go for it.

"You like that?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied, Padmé's willingness to take the initiative exciting him. "Don't stop"...

The next day

Luke and Leia awoke early the next morning, the excitement of visiting Naboo forcing them from their sleep. It was still quiet in the common room when they left their rooms, and so they decided to activate See Threepio.

"Good morning Master Luke and Miss Leia," Threepio greeted cheerfully, seconded by Artoo. "Can I get you some breakfast?"

"Yes please," Leia replied as she and Luke sat down at the small table.

"Are our parents up yet?" Luke asked.

"I'm afraid I don't know, Master Luke," Threepio replied. "I've been shut down all night."

The twins giggled in response, loving how easy it was to get the droid flustered.

"I wonder if we've reached Naboo yet," Luke said as Artoo accessed the food replicator.

"We must be by now," Leia reasoned, eyeing her brother's wrinkled shirt. "Did you sleep in that shirt?" she asked.

Luke looked down at himself. “No!” he replied defensively. “It’s clean; I just took it out of my bag.”

Leia smirked. “Well that explains the wrinkles,” she countered as Threepio set a plate before each of them.

Luke made a face in response. “Well *excuse* me, Miss Perfect,” he replied.

Leia frowned. “I never said I was perfect,” she replied. “But I’m not a slob like you,” she added.

“I am *not* a slob,” Luke retorted as he picked up the glass of juice Artoo had brought him. Leia watched as he took a drink, snorting with laughter as he slopped some down the front of his shirt.

“No, *you’re* not a slob,” she teased as she placed her napkin tidily on her lap. “Not you. Uh uh.”

Luke rolled his eyes in response as he dabbed at his shirt with his napkin. “Shut up, Leia,” he grumbled.

This only made Leia laugh more, which infuriated her brother no end.

Padmé woke up before her husband and, hearing the laughter of her children in the common area, decided to get up. Replacing her nightgown that had managed to find its way to the other side of the room, Padmé gave her hair a quick brush before leaving her snoring mate to sleep.

“Good morning,” Padmé said in greeting to her twins.

Luke and Leia looked up with a smile as their mother kissed each of them on the cheek.

“How long have you two been up?” Padmé asked as she took a seat beside Leia.

“Not that long,” Leia replied. “We couldn’t sleep,” she admitted with a smile.

Padmé smiled. “I know,” she replied. “I’m excited about being at Naboo too.”

“Are we there yet do you think?” Luke asked.

“Well, your father said we’d arrive about dawn,” she replied. “And I think it’s at least that now, isn’t it Threepio?” she asked as the droid set her morning cup of tea before her.

“It is 12 minutes past the seventh hour, Milady,” Threepio reported.

“That means we’ve arrived!” Leia said happily. “I can’t wait to see it!”

“Is Dad awake?” Luke asked.

“Not yet,” Padmé reported. “We’ll let him sleep a bit longer before waking him. He had a bad dream last night that kept him up for a while.”

“What about?” Leia asked, a look of concern in her eyes.

“He didn’t tell me,” Padmé answered. ‘But I have a feeling that it was about the past,’ she told them. “He doesn’t like to talk much about the past.”

“He never has,” Luke agreed. “He wouldn’t even talk about you before we found out that you were alive.”

Padmé nodded. “I know,” she replied. “It will take a lot of support from us for him to get over what happened,” she told her twins.

“We’ll be there for him, Mom,” Leia assured her. “He’s come so far already, hasn’t he?”

“Yes he has,” Padmé agreed. *But he has a long way to go still*, she thought to herself as Threepio brought her a plate of breakfast; a *long way to go*.

Chapter 82

Eighty-two

Coruscant

“Wait here please.”

Breha Organa clasped her hands together on top of the table nervously as she waited for the security guards to bring her husband into the small room. Bail had been placed in a high level security facility, and it had taken Breha days to obtain permission to see him. *You brought this on yourself, Bail*, she told herself grimly as she tapped her fingers on the table top. *You never should have made an enemy of Darth Vader... and you never should have brought our daughter here to let him find her!*

Over the past several months Breha had begun to develop a healthy resentment for her husband who she had decided was to blame for losing Leia. *If you'd never brought her to that meeting she'd still be ours*, she thought bitterly, *and Vader would never have found her. And for that I'll never forgive you, Bail. Never.*

Breha looked up as the door slid open and two clones appeared followed by their prisoner and two more clones. The Queen of Alderaan had to hold back a gasp at the sight of her husband.

The normally well groomed Viceroy looked anything but as he trudged into the room, binders on his wrists. He looked at his wife, the shame and embarrassment he felt clear on his face.

“Are these really necessary?” Breha protested, indicating the binders.

“Afraid so, Ma'm,” one of the clones replied. “Orders of the Empress herself.”

Breha frowned, realizing that trying to argue with the clone would be pointless, and simply waited for Bail to sit down across from her at the small table. She looked over at the clones, resenting their intrusiveness. “I'd like to speak to my husband alone,” she said imperiously.

“That's not possible I'm afraid,” one of the clones responded. “The Viceroy is to be kept under constant watch, Ma'm.”

Breha sighed loudly, showing her clear disdain. She looked at Bail, whose eyes were lowered to the table top. “This is ludicrous,” she said quietly. “I can't believe they won't let me talk to you in private!”

Bail glanced at the clones and then looked up at his wife. “They consider me a dangerous prisoner,” he told her. “I can't be trusted.”

Breha shook her head. “Can't the Senate do anything about this?” she said.

Bail snorted derisively. “The Senate,” he spat. “They've washed their hands of me, Breha. Once our wonderful empress decided to arrest me, they just left me hanging out to dry. I can't

count on them for any help, I know that now. Do you know not one of those hypocrites has even been here to see me?"

Breha frowned. "I know," she said. "I suppose they don't want to be associated with you now," she suggested.

"No, of course not," he replied. "They're too busy kissing the new emperor's ass to bother with me."

"Vader hasn't been seen yet," she told him. "I don't even know if he's alive. There are rumors he died on Kamino."

"No such luck," Bail grumbled. 'I tell you, Breha,' he said, leaning towards her so that the clones couldn't hear. "If I was out of here, I'd kill him myself."

Breha looked fearfully at the clones and then back at him. "Don't talk that way," she admonished him. "You could be executed for saying that!"

"I don't care anymore what they do to me," he said with a sigh. "I'm sick of toeing the line, Breha. Sick of it all."

She stared at him, the resentment and bitterness rising to the surface. "And what about me?" she asked. 'It's bad enough you let Vader take our child from us, and now you're here,' she said bitterly. "How do you think I feel about this? You think I like having the galaxy pointing at me with pity and scorn? Or don't my feelings matter in any of this?"

His wife's outburst surprised Bail, and he said nothing for a moment. Things had been strained between them since Leia had left their lives. And now...

"I didn't say that," he retorted. "I'm just...frustrated is all."

"Yes, I know," she relented. 'So am I. But don't give up,' she told him. "Sooner or later things will settle down. And then, hopefully, you'll be exonerated."

Bail nodded, almost afraid to ask her what was on his mind. "And what about you? What about us, Breha? Are you willing to wait for me?"

Breha was surprised by his question. "I can't believe you'd ask me that," she said quietly. "Haven't I stuck by you through all this?"

"Yes, you have," Bail replied, lowering his eyes again. "I'm sorry," he added.

"You should be," she replied. "I'm a patient woman, Bail. But..."

"Time's up."

They both looked up and saw that the clones were standing closer, looking as though they meant business.

"Very well," Bail said, standing up. Breha stood as well.

"I'll be back when I can," she told him.

Bail nodded, wondering if she was being truthful with him. "I love you, Breha," he said, realizing that she was all he had left in the universe.

She smiled. "Take care of yourself, Bail," she said.

Bail nodded, and then left with the clones, feeling more despondent than he had thirty minutes earlier.

Naboo

The morning sun shone brightly overhead, reflected in the placid waters of Lake Varykino as the gondola made its way towards the lake retreat. Luke and Leia were giddy with excitement, the glorious countryside of their mother's home world more beautiful than they'd even imagined. Padmé sat with her back against her husband, his arms wrapped around her shoulders lightly as they simply enjoyed the ride.

Vader watched the water as it slipped past the boat's hull. Never did he imagine that he'd be able to enjoy the simple pleasure of a day spent with his family this way, to feel the wind in his hair, and hear the laughter of his children. He bent to Padmé and planted a kiss on her shoulder, the joy he felt spilling over.

Padmé looked up at him with a smile. "This brings back memories, doesn't it?" she asked him.

Vader nodded, looking up at the house that was coming into view. "It certainly does," he replied. 'I remember the first time I was here,' he continued. "I was so mad about you I couldn't see straight."

Padmé laughed. "And I was playing hard to get," she remembered.

"Yes you were," she replied. "You nearly made me crazy with that dress you wore that day remember?" he asked, leaning closer so that the twins wouldn't hear.

Padmé nodded. "The one with the bare back?"

"That's the one," he said with a smile. "The sight of your bare shoulders and back, and the scent of your skin... it was impossible to hold myself back from kissing you."

Padmé smiled. "I remember," she said. 'And then I made you stop,' she added. "I was as confused as you were."

"Well I'm glad you managed to get over that," he told her, kissing her softly.

"Dad, enough with the PDA's already," Leia said from the other end of the boat.

Vader and Padmé looked up at their daughter. "PDA's?" Vader said. He looked down at his wife. "What the devil is she talking about?"

"PDA, public display of affection," Padmé told him.

Vader looked back at Leia. "You don't like it when I kiss you mother?" he asked incredulously.

"Well, not if it's once in a while," Luke piped up. "But all the time? Geez!"

Vader and Padmé looked at one another with a smile.

"Your father and I fell in love here," Padmé told them. "We were married right up there on that terrace," she added.

“And I kissed your mother for the first time up there too,” Vader added. ‘So you’ll have to forgive the PDA’s I’m afraid,’ he told the twins. “This place has far too much sentimental value to us both to be able to hold back from many spontaneous displays of affection.”

“Great,” Luke groaned. “Can we go home now?”

A short time later the twins were racing up and down the huge terrace as their parents watched them. Both were hoping that the fresh air, excitement and physical exercise would spell an early bed time for the twins. But by dinner time they seemed as keyed up as they had all day, and were nearly jumping out of their seats with excitement at the prospect of exploring the next day with their parents.

“Can we go to the meadow that you told us about?” Leia asked Padmé.

“We were planning on taking a picnic lunch up there tomorrow,” Padmé replied. “How does that sound?”

“That sounds awesome!” Luke declared. “Do you think those animals still live up there? The ones you told us about, Dad? The one you tried to ride?”

Vader smiled, having completely forgotten that he’d told them about that incident. “Well, perhaps,” he replied. “Although I learned my lesson about trying to ride them. It was a rather painful lesson as I recall.”

The twins laughed.

“Well if there’s one up there *I’m* going to try and ride it just like you did, Dad,” Luke declared.

“Luke your father was nineteen when he tried that,” Padmé pointed out, “not ten.”

“Besides, I was hurt, Luke,” Vader added. “Really hurt.”

Padmé looked at him with a raised eyebrow. “Is that why you were laughing so much? Because you were hurt?”

The twins both looked at their father, the conversation taking an interesting turn.

“Well... I was only laughing on the outside,” Vader claimed, fooling no one. “I couldn’t help but laugh at the way you were freaking out,” he added with a smile.

Padmé shook her head. “Oh is *that* it,” she replied as the twins laughed.

“Excuse me, Miss Padmé,” Paddy Accru said as he stepped into the room. “I’ve started up the fireplace as you requested.”

“Thank you Paddy,” Padmé said. She looked back at Vader and the children. “Shall we?”

Luke and Leia sat before the fire, watching it crackle and dance in the hearth. Padmé watched them, a feeling of peace filling her at the idyllic scene. She had so many fond memories of this room already, and tonight was simply the latest evening of enchantment spent here. She looked at Vader, who sat across from her on the other sofa, his eyes fixed on the fire. But his face was not one of peaceful contentment; rather, one of decided uneasiness.

“Ani?” she asked.

Vader looked over at her.

“You okay?”

Vader looked back at the fire. “They’re sitting too close,” he said simply.

Padmé smiled. “They’re fine,” she said. “Don’t worry so much.”

Vader looked back at her. “I can’t help it,” he told her. “Fire terrifies me now,” he added, looking back at the fireplace.

All of a sudden Padmé understood; fire had ravaged him on Mustafar, fire had forced him to live in the suit for ten years. No doubt the pain of that horrific incident would haunt him forever.

“Of course,” she said. ‘I’m sorry,’ she added. And then she looked at the twins. “Children, come and sit here with us,” she said, not wanting to tell them about their father’s fears. “Your hot chocolate is getting cold.”

Vader looked at her gratefully, loving her immensely. He put his arm around Luke as he came and sat next to him, relaxing in the soft, gentle aura of his son. “Did you two know that I proposed to your mother in this room?” he said.

Leia looked up at her mother. “Really?”

Padmé nodded. “Yes, it’s true,” she replied.

“Of course she turned me down,” Vader put in, looking at his wife with a smile.

“You turned him down??” Luke asked in astonishment.

“Why??” Leia asked.

Padmé smiled. “Well, your father was learning to be a Jedi at the time,” she explained. ‘And emotional attachments were against the Jedi code,’ she went on. “For us to get married went against the rules, and I suppose I was something of a stickler for the rules back then.”

Vader snorted at this point. “You can say that again,” he quipped.

Padmé ignored his comment and continued. “I simply pointed out the difficulty of such a marriage,” she explained.

“But you two got married anyway,” Leia pointed out. “What changed you mind, Mom?”

Padmé looked at Vader with a smile. “Well... I suppose I just came to realize that I loved your father too much to live without him,” she replied. “We were married a few days later, right out there on that terrace.”

“How romantic,” Leia sighed.

“As a matter of fact,” Vader said, “the anniversary of that very day is next week.”

“That’s right!” Padmé said. It had been so long since she’d thought of that day, so long since she’d allowed herself to think of it, that the fact that the anniversary of it was approaching had completely slipped her mind. ‘Fourteen years,’ she said with a smile. “Imagine that.”

Vader nodded. "I never would have believed that we'd be celebrating another anniversary together," he told her.

"No, neither did I," Padmé said. They looked at one another for a moment, suddenly wanting very much to be alone.

"I think it's time for bed for younglings," Vader said, looking at the twins. "It's been a long day."

"But we want to hear more stories," Leia protested.

"Tomorrow," Padmé told her. "We have lots of time for stories," she assured her.

"Okay," Leia sighed, standing up. "Come on Luke," she said.

Luke stood up, unable to stifle a yawn as he did so. "You know, I'm kinda glad to be going to bed," he admitted. "I'm beat!"

Vader smiled at his son. "Then you'll have a good sleep," he said.

"Do you remember the way?" Padmé asked.

"Yes," Leia replied. 'Good night Mom,' she said, kissing Padmé. "Night Daddy," she added, giving Vader a kiss.

"Good night sweetheart," Padmé said as Luke kissed her next. "Sleep well."

The twins left the room together, leaving Vader and Padmé together.

"Alone at last," Vader said, patting the spot beside him on the sofa. Padmé smiled and stood up to join him.

"Is there a particular reason you wanted to be alone with me?" she asked him as he pulled her close.

Vader smiled, and then whispered something into her ear. Padmé's smile grew, and her cheeks went pink.

"You're so bad," she chided him.

"Are you turning me down?" he asked with a smile.

Padmé laughed. "I didn't say that," she said, standing up. 'Come on,' she said. "Let's go."

Chapter 83

Eighty-three

Naboo

The sun shone brightly in the morning sky as Padmé spread out a blanket on the grass. She looked around, smiling when she realized that this was the very spot where she and Anakin had always chosen whenever they came to this meadow together. Little had she realized the first time she'd sat here with him that one day they'd be returning with their children. She could still recall the conversation they'd had when they'd been here, the tension between them rife.

Anakin picks a piece of grass from beside the blanket and toys with it. "You know, Padmé, you didn't need to apologize about yesterday," he tell me. "That was my first kiss, you know."

"It was?" I ask in amazement. "A handsome young man like you?"

He smiles. "Well, kissing isn't exactly encouraged by the Jedi," he reminds me.

"Oh of course not," I reply. "How foolish of me."

"I take it that wasn't your first kiss then," he asks.

I look away, not wanting to tell him the truth.

"No, it wasn't," I reply at last, playing absent mindedly with the hem of my gown. "Not that there have been too many, for there haven't."

"Do you remember your first one?" he asks.

I shrug, still not meeting his eyes. "I don't know," I mumble.

"Sure you do," he insists. "You just don't want to tell me."

I look at him at this point. "Are you going to use one of your Jedi mind tricks to get your answer?" I tease him.

He laughs. "I wish. They only weak on the weak-minded, however."

I sigh. "All right, all right," I say at last, looking away again. "His name was Palo; we were in the legislative youth program together. He was a few years older than me, dark curly hair, dreamy eyes..."

"Okay, okay, I get the idea," he grumbles, his jealousy obvious.

"Hey Mom! There are shaaks down there!"

Padmé's musings were interrupted by the sound of her son's voice, and she looked over to where Luke, Leia and Vader were approaching. Luke and Leia ran ahead, the excitement of being in this special place filling them.

“Shaaks? Don’t let Dad see them,” Padmé said with a smile as the twins reached her.

“I heard that,” Vader called to her.

The twins laughed and looked back at their father.

“Can we go see them, Dad?” Leia asked as Vader reached them.

“Maybe later,” he replied. “Right now I’m starving,” he added.

“So am I,” Luke piped up. “What’s for lunch?”

Dagobah

Obi-Wan Kenobi trudged through the thick mud of the Dagobah swampland, swatting away the insects that seemed to congregate around his head as he did so. The humidity was stifling, and it almost made the ever composed Jedi Master lose patience. But he did not, and simply continued to focus on the presence he felt in vicinity, a presence he’d not felt in ten years.

“Looking for someone, Obi-Wan?”

Obi-Wan stopped and then looked down with a smile as the diminutive form of Yoda emerged from the foliage.

“Found someone I would say,” Obi-Wan replied. “It’s good to see you, Master Yoda,” he added.

Yoda nodded, looking closely at the man. “Aged you have, Obi-Wan,” he said bluntly.

Obi-Wan cocked an eyebrow. “As have you, Master,” he replied.

Yoda snorted as he leaned on his gimmer stick. “Come,” he said. “There is much we must discuss, Obi-Wan. Great changes I have sensed,” he said as Obi-Wan followed behind the ancient master. “Great shifts in the Force I have sensed.”

“Palpatine is dead,” Obi-Wan said. “Anakin killed him.”

Yoda stopped and turned to look up at Obi-Wan, a look of hope in his large eyes. “Then all is not lost,” he replied. “Come, food I have prepared,” he said as he continued on his way. “Come!”

Naboo

“You be careful,” Padmé warned her children. “And don’t even think about riding one, Luke,” she added, looking pointedly at her son.

Luke’s eyes widened in surprise. “I wasn’t!” he replied.

Padmé nodded. “I know you better than that,” she replied. Leia giggled.

“Don’t worry, Mom,” Leia said. “I’ll make sure he doesn’t do anything stupid.”

Luke scowled at his twin, but knew better than to say anything, and simply left with her to go to get a closer look at the herd of shaak that had made their way up to the meadow’s edge.

Padmé turned back to where her husband was laying in the grass. She walked over to him and sat down beside him. “Sleepy?” she asked.

Vader looked up at her. “No,” he said. “Just... thinking.”

“What about?” she asked.

“Lots of things I suppose,” he replied, looking back up at the clouds. ‘Like how much I took for granted at one time in my life. How I will never take those things for granted again.’ He looked back at her. “How lucky I am to be able to have a second chance with you,” he added, lifting his hand to her face.

Padmé smiled, and bent down to kiss him. “We’re both lucky,” she told him. ‘Not many people are given a second chance at life.’ She hesitated before saying what she wanted to say next. “I just hope...” she stopped, trying to find the words that would convey her meaning best.

“What is it?” he asked, sensing her reticence.

Padmé sighed. “I just hope that you use this chance to make things right,” she told him. ‘You’ve already begun,’ she reminded him, “when you killed that monster Palpatine. But there’s still so much you can do, Anakin. So much you need to do.”

Vader said nothing in response, her words striking a nerve. They made him think about all that he needed to atone for, all the damage he needed to repair; and that was overwhelming. He hadn’t let himself think about that, not yet.

“I know,” he said finally. ‘But we’re on vacation, Padmé,’ he reminded her, “I don’t want to think about any of that right now, okay? Besides, there are other things I’d rather do now that we’re alone,” he continued, pulling her towards him again.

“Ani, the children are going to be back at any moment,” she protested as he started kissing her neck.

“I’ll know when they come back,” he assured her between kisses.

“And you’re changing the subject. Again,” she added. It seemed that whenever they began discussing something of import he did this. “Don’t try to sidetrack me again. We need to talk about his.”

“I don’t want to talk,” he told her, nipping at her earlobe. “I want you.”

“But... the twins,” she said, growing exasperated by his stubborn refusal to talk to her. “I don’t want them catching us doing something we’ll have to explain. They’re too young.”

“Relax,” he said, running one hand under her tunic. “Don’t be so uptight.”

This angered Padmé, and she pulled back from him. “Uptight?” she said. ‘Just because I don’t want our ten year old twins seeing us naked out in the open up here?’ she stood up. “Just because I think talking about the future of the galaxy is more important right now than sex?”

Vader looked up at her, confused and frustrated by her irritation. “You make it sound so filthy the way you say it,” he commented. “You never complained before about having sex up

here out in the open.”

She looked down at him. “We didn’t have children before,” she replied. ‘And I didn’t say it was filthy — just inappropriate. Besides, that isn’t the real issue. But you won’t want to acknowledge the issue,’ she pointed out. “You just want to ignore it. Well ignoring it won’t make it go away, Anakin. Sooner or later you’ll have to face it. Sooner or later you’ll have to face the past.”

Vader wanted to say something in response, but Padmé walked away, preventing it.

Padmé walked over to the edge of the meadow, upset with the incident that had just transpired. As much as she wanted him, as much as she loved him, Vader’s stubbornness, his demanding, possessive attitude was, at times, overwhelming. *Surely he can’t expect me to give in to him every time he doesn’t want to talk about something? Am I being unreasonable for pushing him away?*

Padmé’s musings were interrupted by Leia running towards her, Luke following closely behind, both, laughing hysterically. She smiled as they ran to her.

“What happened?” she asked as the twins reached her. “What’s so funny?”

“One of the shaaks let out this *huge* fart!” Luke told her. “Right in the face of another one! It just lifted its tail and let it rip!”

Padmé shook her head. “Oh my,” she said. “And that’s what’s got you laughing so hard?”

“You had to be there, Mom,” Leia told her. “It was so funny!”

Padmé was rather surprised by Leia’s amusement of the incident, for she had always seemed more mature and proper than her twin. *Kids are kids, though*, she reasoned. “I don’t remember *that* ever happening before,” she told them.

“What happened?”

Padmé turned around, surprised by the sound of Vader’s voice all of a sudden. The twins proceeded to relate to him what had happened, which made him laugh far more than Padmé had.

“Can we go swimming now?” Leia asked her parents. “It’s so hot!”

“You call this hot?” Luke replied. “This is nothing, right Dad?”

Vader nodded, watching his wife closely. “I think a swim is a good idea,” he said.

“So do I,” Padmé replied. “Let’s pick up our things and go back to the house to get changed.”

The twins gave a whoop of excitement and ran across the meadow, stopping at the picnic site. Luke scooped up the basket while Leia grabbed the blanket. They looked back to their parents, who, in their opinion, were moving far too slowly.

Padmé walked along side Vader without saying a word, as the tension between them mounted. She could tell that he was annoyed with her, but she didn’t care. She had done what she thought was right, and would not apologize for it.

Dagobah

Obi-Wan sat crossed legged before the fire, sipping carefully at the unusual cup of tea that he had been served. Obi-Wan had all but forgotten the strange palate Yoda had, and had done his best to eat as much of the food the old master had prepared as possible.

“Tell me, Obi-Wan,” Yoda began, sitting down across from him. “Who it was that killed the emperor. Was it Anakin? Or was it Vader?”

Obi-Wan sighed, knowing the question was coming. “In truth, I can’t say for sure, Master Yoda,” he replied. “I sense a great deal of conflict in Vader. There is no doubt that he has changed, that having his family in his life has changed him. But has he abandoned the Dark Side? No, not entirely.”

Yoda nodded. “A delicate time this is, then,” he replied. “With all his powers restored no doubt Vader will be more formidable than ever. If tempted by these powers, as he was once before, no chance will there be for his redemption.”

Obi-Wan frowned. “I cannot accept that, Master Yoda,” he said. “Anakin...Vader... whatever name we use has come so far since Mustafar. He truly has. I have seen the good man he was inside of him, I have sensed his presence. Surely he is on the road to redemption.”

Yoda sighed, and stared into the fire. “You have always been too soft where Skywalker is concerned, Obi-Wan,” he declared. “Too fond of him you were. Clouded your judgment it did.”

Obi-Wan didn’t like this, and Yoda sensed it at once and looked up at him.

“I mutilated and left my best friend to die, Master Yoda,” Obi-Wan replied, keeping his emotions in check. “I took his children from his wife, lying to her about their death, in order to keep him from ever finding them. How was my judgment clouded?”

Yoda could sense Obi-Wan’s anger, and said nothing in reply immediately. It seemed that Kenobi still bore many scars where his greatest pupil was concerned. “Killed him you should have,” he said simply.

“Is that the Jedi way?” Obi-Wan countered. “I left him to his fate; the Force determined what that was. That is the nature of the Force, is it not, Master Yoda?”

Yoda nodded, relenting finally. “Much time you have spent meditating on this,” he commented. “Think you that Vader can be redeemed? Even after everything he has done?”

“I think that if he remains on the path he has embarked upon, then yes, he will,” Obi-Wan replied. “The lure of power is a great danger, no doubt. But I intend to keep him on the path, to be the mentor I should have been all those years.”

“You did your best, Obi-Wan,” Yoda assured him. “A difficult pupil Anakin was. His fall was the result of our blindness, Obi-Wan, not yours. The Jedi were too complacent, too arrogant to see what Palpatine was doing until it was too late.”

Yoda’s words surprised Obi-Wan, and he sensed in the old master a great deal of personal guilt and a strong sense of failure. “But now we have a chance to undo all that, Master Yoda,” he affirmed. “We have a chance to bring the Chosen one back to us.”

Yoda nodded. "And what of the younglings?" he asked. "Strong with the Force, are they?"

"Yes, very strong," Obi-Wan replied at once. "Just as we suspected they would be."

"If trained they are, the future of the new Jedi Order they could be," Yoda commented. "If Vader is not redeemed... the mastery of the Sith will continue forever."

"He *will* be redeemed, Master Yoda," Obi-Wan averred. "I won't fail again. I swear it."

Naboo

Padmé couldn't help but notice how cool her husband was with her for the remainder of the afternoon. Even into the evening he remained detached, and spent a great deal of time in communication with his ship. She had begun to second guess herself, and wondered if she'd been too harsh earlier. This was not the man she married, and he was not the man she'd come to live with months earlier. He was a unique combination of both; the confidence and the charm of Anakin Skywalker merged with the aggression and darkness of Darth Vader. It was like she was getting to know him all over again; just as she had become accustomed to him as Vader while he was in the suit, he seemed quite a different man now that he was out of it.

Luke and Leia were thoroughly exhausted by the time night had fallen, making Padmé's task of getting them to bed rather an easy one. She found herself alone in the parlor, suddenly wishing she'd let them stay up a little longer if only to have their company.

"Kids asleep?"

Padmé looked up at Vader who had entered the room.

"Yes," she replied. "They were very tired."

Vader nodded. "I suppose so," he replied simply.

Padmé frowned, unable to hold back her frustration. "Are you going to remain angry with me for the rest of our vacation?"

Vader scowled. "What makes you think I'm angry with you?" he asked.

Padmé stood up to face him. "I think it's pretty obvious, even for someone who can't read minds," she replied. "You've barely spoken to me all day and have avoided me all evening. What else am I to think?"

"I was in communication with the *Exactor*," he told her. "You're being over sensitive."

His words did little to alleviate her frustration. "I'm not the only one," she retorted.

Vader lifted his eyebrows. "What does that mean?" he asked.

"I think you know," she replied. "You're just as...oversensitive as you claim I am. After all, I'm not the one who's been pouting all afternoon."

"Pouting??!" he cried. "I have *not* been pouting!"

Padmé had to hold back her smile at this point. "Well I disagree," she replied.

"Clearly," he said with a frown. He said nothing for a moment, trying to decide how to formulate his retort. 'Well you needn't worry about my...emotionalism anymore tonight,' he

told her. "I'm going to bed."

"Fine," she replied. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," he replied and then left the room, leaving her fuming.

Padmé stood for a few moments, annoyed and frustrated. And then she had an idea.

Vader had just closed his eyes when the door to the bedroom opened and Padmé entered the room. He could sense her watching him and opened one eye to look up at her.

"I hope I didn't wake you," she said.

"No," he replied.

"I'm going to have a shower," she told him.

"Fine," he replied, rolling over.

Padmé watched him pretend to sleep for a moment and then went into the fresher to begin phase one of her plan. *You have no idea what you've started, Anakin Skywalker*, she thought with a smile as she got undressed. *But I'm certain to be the one to finish it.*

Vader was no where near asleep, even though he was pretending to be. He heard his wife in the fresher taking a shower, and had to fight not to visualize her standing naked under the water. *No, she made it clear earlier that she's not in the mood for that. If she wants it she's going to have to ask for it.* He heard the water turn off and rolled over again so that his back was towards the fresher door and he faced the large dresser on the opposite side of the room. In the mirror he saw the door open and Padmé emerge, wearing only a towel. He closed his eyes, refusing to allow the sight of her turn him on.

Padmé walked over to the dresser and proceeded to comb out her hair. As she did so, the fragrance of the moisturizer she'd applied drifted through the room. Vader smelled it, and recognized it as his favorite fragrance. *Very good, Padmé*, he thought, keeping his eyes closed; *but you'll have to do better than that if you want to best me.*

Padmé set the comb down and opened a drawer. She let the towel drop and pulled out a nightie, one that she'd bought recently, one that she knew would make Vader putty in her hands. She pulled it over her head, allowing the silken fabric to fall easily over her, clinging to each curve. She smiled to herself, knowing that Vader was watching her.

And he was, albeit surreptitiously. *That's a new nightgown*, he realized. *Black... she knows what black nighties do to me*, he thought in frustration. *And that fragrance...* He closed his eyes when she emerged from the fresher once more, resuming his charade of being asleep. She climbed into bed, surrounding him with her fragrance.

Padmé was starting to grow concerned that her efforts were in vain. So far she'd had no reaction whatsoever from Vader. *Is he really sleeping? Or is he just ignoring me again?* Padmé turned to face him, deciding to play along. After a few moments of tension filled silence, she slid over to his side of the bed, something she often did in her sleep. She smiled in the dark as she felt him tense up. *You just keep on sleeping, Anakin*, she thought. *Don't mind me at all...*

Vader was now fighting a losing battle against his body's reaction to her proximity. He could feel her body close to his, the scent of her skin intoxicating him. *Is she doing this on purpose now? Or is she really asleep?* Vader tried to connect to her mind, but she was shielding from him. *She's not asleep*, he realized with a smile. *She's toying with me... well two can play at that game.*

Padmé was smiling to herself, deciding that she was most definitely getting to him when he rolled over to face her, throwing an arm over her as he usually did in his sleep. As he spooned up behind her, Padmé could feel the rather obvious proof that she was getting to him. Padmé smiled, *game over*, she thought, deciding she'd won. But then Vader started snoring, and Padmé nearly sat up in the bed with surprise.

Vader sensed her shock and smiled as he continued to snore loudly. But then she did something unexpected, and he felt the power shift once more. *This isn't going as planned*, he thought, inching away from her lest he lose complete control. He was determined not to let her get to him, determined not to initiate something he knew she wanted as much as he did by this point. Moving slowly, Vader brought his hand up and rested it on her body, half of it on her skin and half on the fabric of her nightgown. He could feel the rapid beating of her heart as he did so and he smiled.

Padmé knew that she would have to up the ante if she were to win this battle, for it was clear that Vader was as determined to win as she was. Putting aside her own rampant desire, she rolled over again, this time to face him. Her face ended up on his shoulder, with her mouth mere centimeters from his neck, her breasts pressing against his bare chest. She sighed in her sleep, her warm breath sending shivers up Vader's spine.

Padmé smiled, and brought her hand over to rest on his chest, the feel of his taut muscles only adding to her need for him. *I don't know if I can do this much longer*, she thought, moving her hand slowly down the front of his body.

"Ani," she whispered into his ear as her hand caressed his bare chest. "Is there something you want?"

"No," he said.

Padmé shook her head at his stubbornness. "Are you sure?" she said.

"Yes," he replied, not sounding terribly convincing.

"You don't sound sure," she replied, kissing his earlobe.

Vader closed his eyes, willing himself not to let her win. "I'm sure," he managed to say. "But I think that there's something you want, judging by the way you're touching me."

"I thought you enjoyed it when I touch you," she countered.

"I do," he replied at once.

"So what are you complaining about?"

"Who said I was complaining?"

"Okay... why are you being so stubborn?"

“Am I being stubborn?”

“Completely.”

“How am I doing that?”

“Why can’t you just admit that you want me?”

Vader was silent for a moment. “I would think it was fairly obvious that I do,” he countered.

Padmé smiled. “So just say it,” she said, not giving in yet.

“You say it,” he countered, rolling over and pushing her onto her back. He ran his hands up the sides of her body . “You say it.”

“You’re so incredibly stubborn,” she sighed, unable to hold back any longer. At this point, she didn’t care anymore. Her need for him was too great to continue the game.

Vader looked down at her, sensing that she was about to concede. “Well?” he asked, smiling at her triumphantly.

She said nothing for a moment. “If I don’t say it, are you going to stop what you’re doing?” she challenged.

He wasn’t expecting her to say that, and was certain he couldn’t stop no matter what she said at this point. “Yes,” he lied.

Padmé smiled. “Liar,” she said, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him down to her. Vader kissed her deeply, deciding that winning wasn’t quite so important anymore.

“I can’t resist you,” he whispered in her ear, “not a chance in Hell I ever could.”

“I know,” she replied.

Vader looked down at her, framing her face with his hands. “You wanted this as much as I did,” he told her breathlessly, “didn’t you?”

“Yes,” she sighed. “Yes, I wanted you desperately.”

Vader smiled. “And you call me stubborn,” he teased.

Padmé merely smiled in response, and then pulled him down to kiss him again.

Chapter 84

Eighty-four

Naboo

I awaken in pain, and know at once what it is: the babies are coming. Rolling over I shake Anakin's shoulder. "Ani, wake up," I tell him. He awakens at once, almost as if he knows I'm in labor. He probably does.

"Is it time?" he asked, sitting up at once.

I nod. "Yes, I'm sure of it," I tell him.

Anakin jumps out of bed in an instant. "Can you get dressed? Do you need help?" he asks, frantically looking for some clothes to put on.

"I can manage," I tell him, moving slowly to the edge of the bed. I hold my hands out to him for assistance and he pulls me to my feet.

"Our babies are on their way," I tell him with a smile.

He smiles and wraps his arms around me. "Luke and Leia will go nuts," he tells me. "I'll go wake them. They'd never forgive me if we left them here and they missed the big event."

"You're right," I tell him, and then squeeze his hands as another contraction hits me.

"Breathe, Angel," he tells me, rubbing my back soothingly. "Breathe through it, remember?"

I nod, not wanting to tell him that breathing does nothing to alleviate the pain I'm feeling. But I don't want him to worry; this is the first time he's been through this after all. He has very little idea what to expect.

A knock is heard on the door— no doubt the twins have sensed what's going on and have awoken.

"Mom? You okay?" Leia calls through the door.

"Come on in kids," Anakin tells them as my contraction passes. The twins rush into the room, a look of concern on their faces.

"Are the babies coming?" Luke asks.

I nod. "Yes," I tell him.

"Yay!" Leia says, clapping her hands excitedly.

"Luke, go and get the speeder warmed up," Anakin instructs our son. "Leia, help your mother get ready while I finish getting dressed."

The twins do as their father asks, a sense of excitement filling us all. Our babies, our beautiful new twins are on their way...

Padmé awoke at this point, disappointment filling her when she realized that she'd only been dreaming. The loss of her baby had left emptiness inside of her, one she'd tried very hard to fill by keeping busy with her family. But the dream she'd just experienced made her realize just how keenly she was still feeling the loss. *What if I was carrying twins?* She wondered anxiously; *what if there were two babies that died, and not just one?* The emotions that Padmé had learned to deal with in the weeks since her miscarriage suddenly overwhelmed her once more, and she closed her eyes against the hot tears that filled them.

Padmé's desolation shook Vader from his sleep, and he rolled over to look at her. "Padmé? Are you okay, Angel?" he asked, running one hand down her arm.

Padmé opened her eyes, and Vader was dismayed to see that she was crying.

"What's wrong?" he asked with a frown. "Why are you crying?"

"It was my dream," she told him.

"A nightmare?" he asked, wiping gently at her tears.

Padmé shook her head. "No, it was a wonderful dream," she told him. 'I was in labor,' she explained. "We were having twins."

"That is a wonderful dream," he agreed. "I don't understand why that would make you cry, though," he told her.

"Because it was only a dream," she told him. "Because... because our baby died," she added, her voice little more than a whisper.

Vader nodded, understanding immediately. He didn't know what to say to make her feel better, for he shared her sense of loss over the death of their tiny, unborn child.

"Well... maybe your dream is a portent of things to come," he suggested at last with a smile. "Maybe we *will* have another set of twins. The way we've been going at it I'd be amazed if you didn't get pregnant again very soon."

Padmé smiled a little at his comment, for she herself had thought the very same thing. "Do you think... I mean, I suppose it's possible that I am now," she said.

Vader nodded. "Yes, it's entirely possible," he concurred.

"Could you tell?" she asked.

"I think so," he replied. He reached out a hand to her, laying it open against her abdomen. Reaching out with the Force, Vader sought out the presence of life within her, knowing that he would recognize his child's presence even at such an early stage. But he sensed only Padmé's life signature and hers alone. He looked up at her. 'Sorry Angel,' he told her. "I don't think so."

Padmé nodded, trying hard not to let the disappointment crush her.

"I guess we'll just have to keep trying," he told with a smile, pulling her close and holding her.

Padmé closed her eyes, her tears spilling out onto his bare chest. "I guess so," she whispered.

Vader kissed the top of her head, her sadness making his own heart ache. He said nothing more, knowing that there were no words that could assuage the pain she was feeling. Instead he just held her close, sensing that was what she needed more than anything.

Later that day

Padmé and Vader sat on the beach watching their children as they enjoyed themselves in the shallows of the lake. Both were pleased to see how comfortable Luke was in the water, despite the fact that he'd only recently learned to swim.

"You've done an excellent job teaching the boy to swim," Vader commented as Luke waved to his parents from the water.

Padmé smiled. "He's a natural," she said. "Once he got over his fear, he learned very easily."

"There's nothing natural about swimming," Vader countered. "Being submerged in water... it's just not right."

Padmé laughed. "You're silly, do you know that?" she said.

Vader smiled. "Yes, you've told me that before," he replied.

"Mom! Dad! Can we swim over to the island?" Leia called.

Padmé and Vader looked at one another.

"I don't know about that," Padmé said. "It's a long way, and Luke hasn't only recently learned to swim."

"I can do it, Mom," Luke called. "It's not that far!"

Vader frowned. "I see he inherited his mother's stubbornness," he quipped.

Padmé looked at him with a shake of her head.

"Why don't we all go?" suggested Padmé, deciding to pay Vader back for his comment. He looked at her at once.

"Just to make sure Luke doesn't run into trouble," she added, smiling at him as she stood up.

"That's a great idea, Mom!" Leia called. "Come on, Daddy!"

Vader looked up at his wife. "You'll pay for this," he told her as he stood up.

Padmé laughed. "Oh come on," she said. 'You're in tip top shape,' she said. "You can swim to that island no problem."

"It's not the exercise I object to," he told her as they walked to the water's edge. "It's the frigidity of the water."

"Baby," she said, and ran into the water. Vader hesitated, and then, bracing himself, ran after her.

Coruscant — Detention Cell

Bail Organa entered the visitors' room, surprised that his wife had returned so soon. *She's probably feeling badly about how she spoke to me the last time*, he reasoned confidently. *As well she should.*

But it was not Breha Organa in the visitor room waiting for Bail. Mon Mothma stood up as Bail was escorted into the room, trying to hide her shock at seeing him looking so shabby.

"Mon, what are you doing here?" Bail asked.

"I came to see how you were doing," she replied as she sat down once more. She forced herself to smile. "It's good to see you," she said.

Bail said nothing as he took a seat. "Is it?" he asked, his bitterness evident.

Mon's smile faded. "Of course," she replied. 'I know that this hasn't been easy for you,' she began. "But..."

"It hasn't been *easy for me*?" he echoed. "I've been in this stink hole for nearly two weeks now. Until today I'd figured that the Senate has just washed its hands of me."

"Don't be absurd," Mothma retorted. "What do you want us to do? Break you out and have Vader revoke what little power we have?"

"Vader, again Vader," he snapped. "Do you have any idea how tired I am of hearing his name? My life was perfect until he interfered. I had everything, Mon — everything! A beautiful family, a prestigious career... and now look at me. Because of him I haven't seen my child in months, and he's probably turned her against me by now. Not only that, my wife blames me for Leia being taken from us, and resents me deeply for it. And of course, I'm here in this hell hole with no chance of release because Emperor Vader has a grudge against me."

Mothma listened to his tirade silently, his bitterness alarming her. Finally, when he was finished, she spoke. "Bail, you took Leia from her mother," she reminded of him. "You lied to Padmé, telling her that her babies had died. Vader's babies. What did you expect he would do when he found out?"

Bail frowned. "Just whose side are you on anyway?" he asked angrily.

Mothma began to grow concerned over Bail's state of mind, for she had never seen him so angry and bitter.

"You know the answer to that, Bail," she replied calmly. "But you have to face hard cold facts. I know your life is not exactly what you envisioned right now, but things will get better. Padmé Amidala is a forgiving woman, but right now she's angry. Give her time, that's my advice. And once she's cooled down, she'll see things differently, I'm certain of it."

Bail snorted in disbelief. "You weren't there when she slapped me in the face," he replied. "That is not the act of a forgiving woman."

Mothma sighed, beginning to think that this was a waste of time. "I'm sorry, Bail," she said finally, standing up. "I came here to offer my support, but clearly you're too angry to talk to me. Perhaps when you've gained some perspective on things we can talk."

The guards indicated for Bail to stand up as they realized that she was leaving.

"Take care of yourself, Bail," she said as she walked past him and out the door.

Bail wanted to call her back, but was prevented from doing so by the guards who brusquely escorted him out the door.

Naboo

"Now, was that so bad?" Padmé asked as she and Vader sat down on the beach of the small island.

"It was actually quite enjoyable," Vader responded as he stretched out on the warm sand. "It feels good to exercise my body again."

Padmé laughed. "You've always complained about this swim, and yet when you get here you're always glad of it."

Vader smiled. "I guess I just like to complain," he replied.

Padmé lifted her eyebrows, but made no reply.

"Mom, what's on this island?" Luke asked as he and Leia returned from their short walk down the beach.

"Not much," Padmé replied. "A small forested area, lots of birds... why?"

"We want to go exploring," Leia explained. "Is that okay?" she asked.

"Just as long as you're careful," Vader said.

"And come back within the hour," Padmé added.

"Okay!" the twins called back and ran off to explore.

"Always on the move," Vader quipped in his best imitation of Obi-Wan Kenobi.

Padmé laughed again, enjoying his playfulness. "Remind you of anyone?" she asked.

Vader nodded. "An overly enthusiastic padawan," he replied. "Who was hopelessly in love with a beautiful senator," he added, looking up at her with a smile.

"I seem to remember that padawan," she replied. 'He was very handsome,' she continued. "And more than a little persistent."

Vader laughed. "That's an understatement," he replied. 'You know I remember being on this beach with you a few times,' he said. "And more often than not we both ended up with sand in the most embarrassing places."

"Yes, I remember that too," she replied. She looked off towards the forest where the twins had disappeared. "Pity we're not alone now," she commented.

Vader looked toward the forest too, and was about to make a rather provocative suggestion when he remembered how annoyed his wife had become the previous day when he'd suggested they take advantage of their children's absence. "Yes, quite a pity," he agreed.

Padmé looked at him, knowing it wouldn't take much convincing to get him to go for a roll in the sand. But he wasn't pressing the issue, and that gave Padmé cause to be hopeful.

"You know I wasn't just talking to Piett yesterday," he told her, folding his arms behind his head.

"No?" she asked. "Who were you talking to?"

"A realtor," he told her.

Padmé frowned. "A realtor? Why?"
'I've been thinking that the place I've been living in for the past ten years isn't terribly... homey,' he replied. "It's served its purpose, but it's more like a military barracks than a home. Besides, now that we're the rulers of the galaxy, I figured we ought to live in something a little more palatial."

"Ani, I don't need a palace," she told him, leaning over and stroking his face softly. "I have you and the twins, that's all I need."

Vader took her hand and kissed it. "I know," he replied. "And I feel the same way. But I want to do this, I want to give you and the kids somewhere nice to call home, with a big garden in the back, and lots of space for all the children we're going to have," he added with a smile.

Padmé smiled. "You want to have lots of children?" she asked.

Vader nodded. "Absolutely," he told her. "I love making babies with you."

Padmé said nothing in response, but simply bent close to him and kissed him.

Chapter 85

Eighty-five

Coruscant

Obi-Wan Kenobi returned to the capital a man on a mission. Yoda had remained on Dagobah, still not entirely convinced that Vader's redemption was a sure thing. Obi-Wan had discovered just how much Yoda had been affected by the past, at least as much as he himself had been. It was clear that the ancient master felt a great deal of culpability for what had happened to the Jedi Order. And it seemed to Obi-Wan that while Yoda welcomed the possibility of a restoration of that Order, the old master was reluctant to be too hopeful that it could happen.

"You can't see the Senator," the clone guard informed Obi-Wan. "Authorized personnel only."

Obi-Wan nodded, adjusting the unfamiliar collar of his the unfamiliar tunic he wore. "I have clearance," he said, using the Force to manipulate the clone's mind easily. "The Empress herself has given me authority to interrogate the prisoner."

"Of course," the clone responded mindlessly. "Follow me."

Obi-Wan smiled to himself as he followed the clone through the blast doors and into the detention block.

"Wait in here," the clone instructed Obi-Wan as he lead him into the visitors' room. "I'll bring the prisoner here."

"Very well," Obi-Wan replied, sitting down at the metal table in the middle of the small room.

Obi-Wan didn't have to wait long before Bail Organa was brought into the room. He was nearly overwhelmed by the feelings of anger, bitterness and desperation the former senator was filled with.

"Leave us," Obi-Wan said, not taking his eyes from Bail as he sat down across the table from him.

"That's against regulations," one clone began.

Obi-Wan simply looked up at the clone. "Leave us," he said again.

At once the clones left, much to Bail's surprise.

"Why General, Kenobi," Bail began bitterly, "what a pleasant surprise."

"How are you keeping, Senator?" Obi-Wan replied, ignoring the jibe.

"How do you think?" Organa snapped in reply. "This isn't exactly a luxury resort I'm staying in, Obi-Wan."

“Yes, yes I know,” Obi-Wan replied. “I’m sorry. I suppose I’m not sure what to say.”

“No? You had plenty to say back on Kamino,” Organa retorted. “When you stabbed me in the back and took Vader’s side.”

“That isn’t exactly what happened, Senator,” Obi-Wan replied.

“Then perhaps you ought to tell me what happened,” Organa replied. “Because I’m not sure I understand.”

“Things are not as we had originally believed,” Obi-Wan began. “Vader has changed, Senator. I believe he is on his way to redemption.”

“I don’t give a damn about Vader’s redemption,” Organa snapped. “He stole my life from me, Obi-Wan. I want it back.”

Obi-Wan frowned. “Are you serious?” he asked, finally unable to hold back his disdain. “First of all, the fate of the galaxy rests in the hands of Darth Vader. If he is to become Anakin Skywalker again, it would have a tremendous impact on the galaxy, just as the birth of Darth Vader had.”

Organa didn’t want to acknowledge that Obi-Wan was right, and simply remained silent.

“Secondly,” Obi-Wan continued, taking advantage of Organa’s silence, ‘you and I both must take equal share of responsibility in what happened, Senator,’ he said. “We both decided to take the twins, to lie to Padmé. For my part I will live with the guilt of that for the rest of my life; but I have done what I can to atone for it.”

Organa did not want to hear about atonement.

“If there is anyone who need to atone for their actions, it’s Vader,” Organa stated. “Have you forgotten, Obi-Wan? Have you forgotten how he slaughtered the Jedi? How he attacked his pregnant wife and nearly killed her?”

“No, I have not forgotten,” Obi-Wan returned. ‘I was there, Senator,’ he added calmly. “But I was also there to witness Vader turn against his master,” he continued. “I was there when he drove his lightsaber through the heart of the emperor. So you see, he has already begun to atone. He has already embarked upon the road to redemption.”

Organa was too shocked to respond for a moment. *Vader killed the emperor?? How is that possible? There must be some mistake...*

“There’s no mistake,” Obi-Wan replied, reading the man’s mind easily. “Palpatine abducted Padmé when he learned that she was pregnant again. It was his plan to take her child from her once it was born and then kill her. Vader knew he couldn’t defeat Palpatine in his physical state, and so he asked me to help him. I did. And do you know why, Senator?”

Organa said nothing in response and simply waited for Obi-Wan to continue.

“My reasons were threefold,” Obi-Wan continued. “First of all, I did it to ensure the destruction of the monster that had destroyed the Jedi. That may be revenge, which goes against the Jedi Code; but quite frankly I don’t care anymore. The Jedi are all but extinct because of Palpatine, and I needed to ensure that he died for what he had done. Secondly, I wanted to ensure that Senator Amidala, that Padmé was safe. She has always been a good

friend to me, and I have never been able to forgive myself for what I did to her. And lastly, I needed to see with my own eyes the proof I craved, the proof that my instincts were correct; that Anakin Skywalker was still alive within the black malevolence of Darth Vader. And I got my proof, Senator. I know he's there, I've seen it. And now that he's been physically transformed, his redemption is closer than ever."

Organa's mind was reeling by now, information overload. "I... I had no idea," he said at last. "But that doesn't change the fact that Vader took Leia from me," he felt compelled to add, his own words starting to sound lame to even his own ears.

Obi-Wan sighed. "Yes, he did," he agreed. "He did what any father would do—he claimed his child. Put yourself in his shoes, Senator. Wouldn't you do the same thing? You felt the pain of losing her keenly and she was not your own flesh and blood; imagine how much deeper the wounds would be if she were? If you'd learned that she'd been stolen from you?"

"I love Leia as though she were my own child," Organa retorted angrily. "No one could love her more than I do! No one!"

Obi-Wan could see that he was starting to hit raw nerves, and yet he pressed on. "Perhaps," he replied. "But she is Vader's child, not yours. She belongs with her real parents. I see that now, now that I've seen them as a family, I know it's right that they are together. We were wrong, Senator. I'm willing to admit it, and I've asked for forgiveness for what I did. Might I suggest you do the same, unless of course you wish to spend the rest of your life in this lovely institution," he concluded, standing up. "It's up to you, Senator," he added. "I've always known you to be a man of wisdom and sound judgment. Put aside your emotions and try to see the big picture. You may find it will change your life for the better."

With that Obi-Wan left, leaving a very perplexed and humbled Bail Organa behind him.

Naboo

Padmé, I saw your ship . . .

Oh, Anakin!

It's all right, you're safe now. What are you doing out here?

I was so worried about you. Obi-Wan told me terrible things.

What things?

He said you have turned to the dark side . . . that you killed younglings.

Obi-Wan is trying to turn you against me.

He cares about us.

Us??!

He knows . . . He wants to help you. Anakin, all I want is your love.

Love won't save you, Padmé. Only my new powers can do that.

At what cost? You are a good person. Don't do this.

I won't lose you the way I lost my mother! I've become more powerful than any Jedi has ever dreamed of and I've done it for you. To protect you.

Come away with me. Help me raise our child. Leave everything else behind while we still can.

Don't you see, we don't have to run away anymore. I have brought peace to the Republic. I am more powerful than the Chancellor. I can overthrow him, and together you and I can rule the galaxy. Make things the way we want them to be.

*I don't believe what I'm hearing . . . Obi-Wan was right. You've changed.
I don't want to hear any more about Obi-Wan. The Jedi turned against me. Don't you turn against me.
I don't know you anymore. Anakin, you're breaking my heart. I'll never stop loving you, but you are going down a path I can't follow.
Because of Obi-Wan?
Because of what you've done . . . what you plan to do. Stop, stop now. Come back! I love you.
Liar!
No!
You're with him. You've betrayed me! You brought him here to kill me!
NO! Anakin. I swear... I...*

Vader sat with a start, his heart racing, his body bathed in sweat. He sat for a few seemingly endless moments in the dark, discombobulated for a moment, fighting to shake off the horrific images of his nightmare. For a brief, horrifying moment he wasn't certain if everything that had happened in the past few months weren't more than a beautiful dream, and that his beloved Angel had truly died at his hand in that black moment of insanity on Mustafar.

But then he felt his wife stirring beside him in their bed, and her warm presence surged into his, pushing out the doubts and the fear. Vader was shaken by the power of their connection, and dropped his face into his trembling hands. He knew that if he lived to be a thousand years old, he would never forgive himself for what he had done to her that day. *And yet she forgives me... how is that possible? How can she bear to be in my life after what I did to her that day?*

"Ani? You okay?"

"Yes," he lied, grateful that she couldn't see his face in the dark, for had she seen his tears she would have known something was wrong. "I'm just thirsty," he added, getting out of the bed.

Padmé sighed sleepily and rolled over as Vader went to the fresher, blissfully unaware of the Hell he was going through once more.

Later that morning

Rain had moved in and didn't seem to be letting up, and so Luke and Leia had managed to convince their parents to take a trip into the nearby village to see the sights. Vader had agreed only on condition that they were accompanied by a security guard. Padmé wasn't thrilled by the clone's rather conspicuous presence, but decided she could live with it if it meant taking the twins on an outing.

As the twins checked out the locally made goods at a small village shop, Padmé watched her husband closely. She'd noticed how quiet he'd been all day, and had a feeling she knew why. *He's been having nightmares again*, she reflected grimly. Padmé knew that Vader carried inside of him a lot of guilt about the past, and that it would take him a lifetime to come to grips with it. But she also knew that so long as he refused to talk about the past, so long as he refused to even acknowledge it, there would never be healing.

“They seem to be having fun.”

Vader looked down at his wife, giving her a smile.

“Yes, they inherited your love of shopping it seems,” he quipped.

Padmé laughed. “I suppose so,” she replied. She studied his face for a moment. “Are you okay?” she asked.

Vader nodded. “Yes,” he replied at once.

“You’re so... pensive,” she said, linking her arm through his. “Want to tell me what’s on your mind?”

Vader said nothing for a moment, and simply held her hand as he watched the twins for a moment or two. “I was thinking of how many anniversaries I missed over the years,” he told her. “How many did we get to celebrate together, Padmé? One? Two maybe?”

Padmé nodded. “I know,” she said quietly. “But we’ll have a life time of anniversaries to celebrate from now on,” she was quick to remind him.

“Yes, true,” he replied. He was silent for a moment as a frown formed on his face. ‘But that doesn’t make up for the ones we didn’t celebrate,’ he added. “Nothing can ever make up for that, Padmé. Nothing.”

Padmé could sense the guilt behind his words, and was about to reply when the twins came running over to them, each of them with veritable armfuls of goods each.

“Can we get these? Please?” Leia asked.

“All of this?” Padmé asked. “Surely you don’t need all of this.”

“It’s not for us,” Luke told her. “They’re for our friends back home, Mom.”

“And for Han and Obi-Wan,” Leia added.

Padmé smiled, the generosity of her children warming her heart. She looked up at Vader. “What do you think?” she asked.

Vader smiled. “I think that’s a wonderful idea,” he said. “Let’s go check out before we end up buying the whole shop.”

After checking out, the family had lunch at a small café nearby. Luke and Leia proceeded to show each item they’d purchased as they waited for the serving droid to bring them their lunch. Vader and Padmé were amused by the twins’ enthusiasm and listened patiently as they explained who each gift was for.

“You’re both very generous,” Padmé commented as the twins put their purchases away. “Your friends will be thrilled.”

Vader nodded, as an idea came to him. “I think I need to do some shopping too,” he said. “A rather special occasion is coming up,” he added, looking at Padmé with a smile.

“Ani, you don’t have to get me anything,” she told him. “Really.”

Vader frowned. "I've missed too many anniversaries not to," he told her. "So expect a gift. A big one."

Padmé smiled. "Now I see where Luke and Leia get it from," she said.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Their generosity," she said, leaning over and kissing him.

"Mom!!" the twins groaned in unison.

Chapter 86

Eighty-six

"Did you get in touch with Han?" Padmé asked Vader as she entered the room.

Vader looked up at her. "Not yet," he told her. "I had some other things to do first."

"Like what?" she asked, coming over to stand beside him.

"Never mind," he replied, closing the screen and smiling at her.

Padmé frowned. "Why don't you want me to see what you're doing?" she asked. "Are you trying to hide something?"

"Well, if you must know, I was sending a message to my mistress," Vader told her, assuming a sheepish expression. "I didn't want you to find out this way but..."

"Oh shut up," she said, smacking him on the arm.

Vader laughed. "What, don't believe me?" he asked, pulling her onto his lap.

"No," she replied. "Not for a minute."

"Awfully sure of yourself, Milady," he replied, running his hands up her back and into her hair.

Padmé lifted an eyebrow. "With good reason," she replied. "Or are you forgetting last night?"

Vader smiled. "How could I forget?" he asked, nuzzling the side of her neck. "I think we set a new record, didn't we?"

"Yes," she replied, closing her eyes. "So any... mistress would have a very difficult time topping that."

Vader laughed. "Indeed," he agreed, nipping on her earlobe.

"Ani, you know what that does to me," she sighed.

"Yes, I know," he replied.

"Mom! Dad! Can we go swimming?"

"Looks like this will have to wait for later," Vader said as he sensed the twins rapidly approaching.

Padmé nodded. "Yes, I suppose it will," she agreed, standing up as the twins ran into the room.

"Can we go swimming? Please?" Leia asked.

"Absolutely," Padmé replied. "Are you coming, Ani?"

“In a bit,” he replied. ‘I still have a few things to take care of,’ he told her. “I’ll meet you down there.”

“Don’t be long, Dad,” Luke told his father.

Vader smiled. “I won’t,” he replied. He waited for the twins to leave with their mother before returning to the computer screen. He opened up the browser once more and scanned over the information on the screen. “Three more,” he said thoughtfully, rubbing his chin. He was about to investigate some possibilities when the comm indicated that there was someone contacting him from the capital. He opened up the communication and was surprised to see Obi-Wan.

“Hello Anakin,” Obi-Wan began with a smile. “I trust you’re enjoying your vacation.”

“Very much,” Vader replied at once. “I was going to contact you after I finished shopping,” he added.

Obi-Wan’s eyebrows lifted ever so slightly. “Shopping?” he asked.

“For Padmé,” Vader explained. “Our anniversary is in two days and I’m planning on spoiling her rotten.”

Obi-Wan smiled. “Well she is certainly deserving of that,” he commented.

“Yes she is,” Vader agreed. “What’s going on?” he asked.

“A great deal, actually,” Obi-Wan replied. “I had a rather interesting conversation with Bail Organa earlier this week.”

The smile left Vader’s face at once. “Interesting how?” he asked.

“He’s very bitter,” Obi-Wan informed him.

“Tough,” Vader snapped.

Obi-Wan wanted to smile, but decided against it. “Perhaps this should wait until you return,” he said. “I don’t want to put a damper on the festivities.”

“No, no I want to know,” Vader replied. ‘I want to know what happened with Yoda as well,’ he added. “Why don’t you come out here for a day?” he asked. “I want to start training the twins, and I could use your input,” he added, surprising Obi-Wan.

“If you’re certain it won’t be an intrusion,” Obi-Wan replied.

“Not at all,” Vader replied. “What do you say?”

Obi-Wan smiled. “I say I’d be delighted, Anakin. Thank you.”

A short time later Vader made his way down to the beach where he found his wife lying down on a towel watching Luke and Leia. He smiled and came up behind her, planting a kiss on the small of her back.

“Hope you put sunscreen on,” he told her as he sat down beside her. “Can’t have this beautiful skin getting burned.”

Padmé smiled up at him. “I did,” she told him. “But the back is always hard to get to.”

“Well then allow me,” he said, picking up the tube of sun block from the sand and opening it up. He looked out at the twins as they cavorted in the water. ‘I asked Obi-Wan to come for a visit,’ he told her. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” she replied. “Though I am rather surprised that you’d do so.”

“I have an ulterior motive for doing so,” he replied.

“And what is that?” she asked.

“I need him to stay with the kids when we’re away.”

Padmé frowned. “What do you mean? Where are we going?”

Vader smiled. “To Bespin. Tomorrow. For two days.”

Padmé’s eyes widened. “Really??”

He nodded. “You like the idea?” he asked.

“I love it!” she declared, sitting up and wrapping her arms around his neck.

Vader embraced her. “I thought it would be a nice place to celebrate our anniversary,” he told her.

“It’s wonderful, Ani,” she told him, kissing him on the cheek. ‘Just wonderful!’ She pulled back and looked at him. “So that’s what you’ve been doing on the computer,” she said.

Vader nodded. “Yes, well... partly,” he told her. “That’s only part of your gift,” he told her.

“Part of it??” she asked. “I don’t need anything else beside that.”

“I know,” he told her, stroking her hair softly. “But my intention is to spoil you. So prepare yourself.”

Padmé laughed. “Okay, I think I can handle that,” she replied.

Coruscant

Obi-Wan was surprised by the invitation he’d received, and it made him hopeful that Vader was closer to succumbing to Anakin Skywalker. The last time they’d spoken, Obi-Wan had still sensed a great deal of conflict in his former pupil; but it was clear that even in his conflicted state, Vader was still far stronger. The arrogance was still there, but it was not nearly as pronounced as it had been. Clearly the influence of Padmé and the twins was changing Vader, and it was Obi-Wan’s hope that he would be able to influence him as well. And now he was being given a chance to do so.

“Going somewhere, General?”

Obi-Wan looked up from his packing to see Han Solo standing in the doorway.

“I was just going to ask you if you wanted to grab some dinner, but it looks like you’re getting ready to take off,” Han commented.

“I am,” Obi-Wan replied. “I’ve just spoken with Anakin, and he has asked me to come to Naboo.”

Han nodded in understanding. “The twins start school again in a few days,” he said. “I don’t imagine it will be a long stay.”

“No, I don’t imagine so,” Obi-Wan agreed. He could tell that Han was somewhat envious of his place in the Skywalker family and smiled at the young man. “I’m sure the twins will be full of stories to regale you with when they return, Han,” he said.

Han laughed. “Yeah, no doubt,” he replied. ‘Well have a good trip,’ he said. “Give everybody my best.”

“I will,” Obi-Wan replied. He zipped up his haversack as Han walked away, and then picked it up from his bed. Slinging it over his shoulder, he left the room and made his way down to the docking bay.

Naboo

Luke and Leia had once again talked their parents into swimming out to the island. And no sooner had they arrived, when both twins had another request to make.

“Can we go exploring? We’ll be careful, just like last time.”

Vader and Padmé looked up at the twins, both wondering the same thing: *where do they get the energy?*

“Go ahead,” Padmé said. “Remember — no more than one hour, okay?”

“Got it, Mom,” Luke said. “Let’s go,” he said to his twin and the two of them ran off.

“So when can we expect Obi-Wan?” Padmé asked as she sat down beside Vader in the sand.

“Later tonight I would think,” he replied. “So we can leave for Beshpin first thing in the morning.”

Padmé smiled. “I can’t wait,” she replied. “I haven’t been to Cloud City in ages.”

“No, neither have I,” Vader replied. “Just imagine, two entire days with no interruptions, no getting up early...” he smiled.

“It will be like another honeymoon,” Padmé agreed.

Vader nodded. “Yes, how will we spend our time? Any ideas?”

Padmé smiled. “I have a couple,” she said, running a finger down over his bare chest.

Vader captured her hand in his and kissed the tips of her fingers. “I’m sure you have more than a couple,” he told her with a smile. “You’re a very creative woman.”

“True,” she replied, pushing him onto his back. “Creativity is always a good thing,” she added, looking down at him with a smile.

“You’ve got that look in your eyes, Angel,” he told her with a smile.

“Do I?” she said. ‘We really shouldn’t do anything,’ she continued, letting her hair brush against his bare torso. “Not with the kids nearby.”

“No, we probably shouldn’t,” he agreed. “But if you keep doing what you’re doing, I can’t be held responsible for what I do,” he warned her.

She smiled. “Is that a promise?” she asked.

He shook his head with a smile. “You really do like to live dangerously, don’t you?” he asked.

Padmé’s smile grew. “I married you, didn’t I?” she asked.

Vader laughed. “You have a point,” he replied. “What about the kids?” he asked as he ran his hands up the length of her arms.

“They were gone an hour last time,” she told him, planting a kiss on his chest. “We have time.”

“Wait a minute,” he said, “is this the same woman who kicked my butt for wanting to get naked up on the meadow?”

“I didn’t do that,” she protested. “But if you’re afraid...”

“I’m not,” he assured her.

Padmé smiled. “Are you sure?” she asked.

“Yes, very sure,” he told her.

“That’s good,” she replied as she moved closer to kiss him.

A little later...

“It will be so nice to go away together,” Padmé sighed as she relaxed in the crook of Vader’s arm.

“It will,” he agreed. ‘We should be able to be fairly anonymous there too,’ he added. “The Empire has had very little to do with that planet.”

Padmé nodded. “That’s good,” she said. “The last thing I want is to be mobbed by reporters.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” he replied.

Padmé hesitated for a moment, wondering if she ought to take advantage of the moment to try and get him to open up to her. “What are your plans for the Empire, Ani?” she asked finally. “Have you thought about that?” she asked.

Vader said nothing for a moment as he watched the clouds flit across the sky above them. “Yes,” he replied. ‘I’ve thought a lot about it. The way I see it, the Empire is the only thing keeping the galaxy relatively stable right now,’ he told her. “It’s not perfect, but I plan to make it so.”

Padmé frowned, not liking what she was hearing. “How do you plan to do that?” she asked.

He looked down at her. “With your help, my brilliant, beautiful wife,” he told her with a smile.

Padmé said nothing, too surprised by his response to respond. And then they heard the twins' voices, and the subject was dropped.

"Mom, Dad, look what we found!" Leia said as she and Luke ran to them.

Vader and Padmé sat up and watched as the twins ran across the beach.

"What have you got there?" Vader asked their daughter when they saw that she was holding something in her hands.

"It's a baby bird," Luke told them excitedly. "We found it at the bottom of a tree!"

"You shouldn't take a baby bird from its home," Vader told them.

"Dad, the mother pushed it from the nest," Leia told him. "We saw it happen!"

"Why would she do that?" Luke asked.

"It must be the smallest," Padmé said, looking at the pathetic little creature. "Animals will do that to the weakest one in order to give the strong ones a better chance of survival."

"That's so mean!" Leia cried. "The poor little thing," she said, looking back at the bird.

"Can we keep it?" Luke asked hopefully. 'It needs a home,' he added, looking at the bird. "It will die if we leave it here."

Padmé and Vader looked at one another, neither of them having the heart to say no.

"How would you care for it?" Vader asked. "Do you know anything about this species of bird?"

"No, but we could look it up on the holonet," Leia replied readily. "Please Daddy; we'd do anything we needed to do to save its life. Please?"

"How are you going to get it back to the house?" Vader asked. "You can't swim with a bird in your hands," he pointed out.

"Well... we could get the boat," Padmé suggested. "You could stay here with the kids while I swim back and get Paddy to bring it over."

The twins nodded enthusiastically.

Vader sighed, knowing he was outnumbered. "I suppose that would work," he replied. 'But I don't want you to get your hopes up,' he added. "This bird may not make it. Nature works in ways we don't always understand."

"We know, Dad," Luke replied. "But we want to try," he added.

"Very well," Vader said. 'But I'll swim back,' he said, looking at Padmé. "I don't want you swimming back alone."

"Ani, I've done it hundreds of times," she protested.

"I know," he replied walking over to the water. "I'll be back as soon as I can," he said, looking back at them over his shoulder.

The twins and Padmé watched as he waded into the water and then dove into it, cutting through the water with powerful strokes.

“Dad’s the best,” Luke said with a smile.

Leia nodded in agreement.

Chapter 87

Eighty-seven

Naboo

Obi-Wan arrived at the lake retreat just about dinner time, and was welcomed warmly by the family. Luke and Leia filled him in on all that had been happening while they were on Naboo, including their recent discovery of an orphaned bird. Obi-Wan listened with a smile and a great deal of patience, amused and delighted by the twins' enthusiasm.

"You know, Obi-Wan is something of an expert when it comes to animals," Vader told the twins at dinner time. "He'll probably be able to help you with your patient."

"Is that true, Obi-Wan?" Leia asked hopefully.

Obi-Wan looked at Vader. "Well, I think your father exaggerates slightly when he uses the word *expert*," he replied. "Though I do know something about animals."

"Maybe while Mom and Dad are away you can help us look after him," Luke said.

Obi-Wan was surprised hearing this and looked once more at Vader. "You're going away?" he asked.

Vader smiled sheepishly. "Well, I was hoping to take Padmé to Bespin for a couple of days," he said. "It's our anniversary tomorrow," he added for good measure. "I was hoping you wouldn't mind staying here with Luke and Leia," he concluded.

"You... you want me to stay with them?" Obi-Wan asked, surprised by the level of trust Vader was demonstrating. "Alone?"

Vader could sense his former master's surprise and smiled. "Yes, if you're willing to do it," he said.

"We realize it's short notice," Padmé put in.

"No, not at all," Obi-Wan replied. "I'd be delighted to stay with the twins," he told them with a smile. "Thank you for thinking of me," he said, looking at Vader.

Vader nodded, knowing how much this gesture of trust meant to Obi-Wan. "Thank you," he said.

Later that night

"Beautiful night."

Vader turned to see Obi-Wan walking across the terrace to meet him.

"Yes, it certainly is," Vader replied as Obi-Wan came to stand beside him. "Everything is beautiful here," he added. "Being up here with Padmé alone I didn't stand a chance, Obi-Wan. I couldn't help but fall in love with her."

Obi-Wan smiled. "You were already in love with her," he pointed out. "But being here certainly did nothing to cool the flames of your ardor."

"No, it didn't," Vader agreed. "I was so young, so... impressionable."

"You were," Obi-Wan agreed. "A perfect victim for Palpatine."

Vader turned and looked at him. "Is that how you see it?" he asked.

"Yes, partly," Obi-Wan replied. 'He used you, but you allowed him to do it,' he continued. "And the Jedi had no idea what was going on until it was too late to do anything about it."

Vader frowned and turned his eyes back to the black lake waters below. "He was devious, Obi-Wan. Devious and mad. He would have done anything necessary to fulfill his plans to take control of the galaxy."

"Yes, true," Obi-Wan agreed. He hesitated for a moment before continuing, but then pressed on, decided he had to say what was on his mind. "What are *your* plans, Anakin? You're in control now. The power is in your hands now. What do you plan to do with all that power?"

Vader was growing tired of being asked this question and said nothing in reply.

"Anakin, surely you realize that sooner or later you will have to make a decision about the future of the Empire," Obi-Wan continued. "And the decisions you make will affect the galaxy as profoundly as Palpatine's did ten years ago."

"I realize that, Obi-Wan," Vader replied quietly.

"So I suppose you need to ask yourself who it is that will be making those decisions," Obi-Wan said.

Vader looked at him questioningly.

"Will it be Darth Vader or Anakin Skywalker who rules the Empire?" Obi-Wan asked. 'The future of the galaxy will depend on who it is that is making the decisions.' He paused to let this sink in before continuing. "So I suppose you have to ask yourself — who am I? Skywalker or Vader? Do you know, Anakin?"

Vader said nothing for a moment, his eyes returning to the dark waters below. "No," he said finally. "I don't know. I'm not sure I'm either any more, to be honest. I'm not sure I ever can be."

Obi-Wan sighed, for he himself had suspected as much. Anakin Skywalker was gone forever; at least the Anakin Skywalker he had once known. But so was Darth Vader, wasn't he? Surely this man who stood before him was not the same Dark Lord who had terrorized the galaxy for a decade?

"I suppose then the question is who do you want to be?" Obi-Wan asked at last.

Vader ran his hands into his hair, the question forcing him to reflect upon things he was not ready to face. But there was no fooling Obi-Wan; as much as Padmé knew him, she couldn't read his mind and his heart the way Obi-Wan had always been able to do.

"I want to be the man Padmé needs," he said at last. 'I want to be the father my children deserve,' he added. "I want to be the leader who can put an end to all the fighting, all the chaos... who that is, I don't know."

Obi-Wan watched him closely, sensing his discomfort. "I think you do," Obi-Wan replied. "Only you don't want to admit it."

"Is that what you think?" Vader asked, not looking at him.

"Yes," Obi-Wan replied readily. 'And do you want to know what else I think?' "Somehow I think you'll tell me even if I say no," Vader remarked.

"You're right, I will," Obi-Wan replied. "I think you want to be Anakin Skywalker again, only you don't know how. I think you're afraid to try because becoming him again will mean facing the past and what happened to him, what you allowed him to become."

Vader didn't like the sound of this. "I'm not afraid of anything," he countered.

"No? Is that why you've been having nightmares about the past?" Obi-Wan challenged.

Vader frowned. "What makes you think I've been having nightmares?" he asked.

"Padmé told me," Obi-Wan told him. "She's worried about you. She wants to help you, but doesn't know how."

"She told you that?" Vader asked.

"Yes," Obi-Wan replied. 'Think about this for a moment, Anakin,' he continued. "Think about what happened ten years ago. You didn't tell any of us, including Padmé, what you were going through. Don't make the same mistake again. She loves you, even after everything she's been through. Don't shut her out."

Vader said nothing in response, which didn't surprise Obi-Wan at all. So he simply turned away and returned inside the house, leaving Vader alone to ponder his words.

Padmé was brushing out her hair at her dressing table when Vader entered their bedroom.

"Where have you been?" she asked, looking at him in the mirror's reflection.

"Talking to Obi-Wan," Vader told her as he sat down on the end of the bed to watch her.

"Everything okay?" she asked.

Vader nodded. "He had a lot to say," he told her.

Padmé set her brush down and turned to face him. "Did he?" she asked.

Vader nodded again.

Padmé could see that whatever it was they had been discussing, it must have been serious. "Do you want to talk about it?" she asked.

Vader looked at her, the words of his former master coming to mind: *don't shut her out*.

"He asked me some hard questions," Vader told her. "Questions I've been avoiding asking myself for weeks now."

Padmé was pleased to hear it, and simply nodded in response. “Such as?” she asked.

Vader sighed. “He asked me who I want to be,” he replied.

“What did you tell him?” she asked.

“I told him the truth,” he responded. ‘That I want to be the man you need me to be,’ he told her. “The question is who is that man, Padmé? Can you tell me?”

Padmé was startled by the question, and even more so by the look in his eyes.

“I’m not sure I know how to answer that,” she told him, standing up to walk over to him.

He looked up at her, holding a hand out to her. “Of course you do,” he replied. “You know me better than I know myself, you always have. I didn’t tell you ten years ago what I was going through, and I’m determined not to let that happen again. I need you, Padmé. I need you to help me find myself again.”

Padmé felt her eyes fill with tears as he pulled her onto his lap. “Ani,” she said, stroking his hair softly. ‘You *are* the man I need you to be,’ she told him. “I wouldn’t be here with you if you weren’t.”

Vader nodded, running his hand up and down her back slowly. “Obi-Wan asked me who would be running the Empire, Darth Vader or Anakin Skywalker,” he told her. “And I didn’t know what to tell him. I’m not sure I’m either of those men anymore, I’m not sure I ever can be again.”

“No, you’re not the same Anakin Skywalker you were ten years ago,” she affirmed. ‘But neither are you Darth Vader,’ she hastened to add. “You are *not* the man that did Palpatine’s bidding, even when it cost you everything.”

“So who am I then?” he asked. “Neither Vader nor Skywalker?”

“You’re Anakin Skywalker,” she told him. ‘You’re the man I fell in love with, the man your mother believed in, the Chosen One,’ she added. She hesitated before continuing, but decided to press on, taking advantage of the opportunity to speak her mind. “And I think it’s time you abandoned the name that monster gave you,” she continued. “Vader is a Sith name, Ani, a slave name. It’s the name Palpatine used to take your soul and enslave you with. You’re not his slave any more. It’s time to reclaim the name you were born with, the name your mother gave you. And it’s time to give our children that name too.”

“You think I should go by Skywalker again?” he asked.

“Yes, it’s time,” she told him. “What’s holding you back?”

“It’s just that... the Empire knows me as Vader,” he told her. “It may create problems if I change my name now when I’m about to begin my reign.”

Padmé frowned. “You’re the emperor,” she reminded him. “You don’t have to answer to anyone, Anakin.”

He nodded, knowing she was right. “Yes, that’s true,” he replied. “I suppose it is time, isn’t it?”

"It's past time," she told him. 'I hate the name Vader,' she told him. "I always have. I hate that our children have that name. Anakin Skywalker is their father, not Darth Vader. They deserve their father's name."

He smiled. "Tell me how you really feel, Angel," he teased.

Padmé smiled. "I am," she said. "Whether you like it or not," she added.

Anakin laughed. "You've never had any trouble doing that," he remarked.

"Well you need someone to keep you in line," she replied.

Anakin laughed again. "So you and Obi-Wan are collaborating then, are you?"

Padmé nodded, the irony of his statement not lost on her. Ten years ago he had believed she'd been in league with Obi-Wan against him, and nearly killed her for it. *He **has** changed*, she averred. *The darkness is gone*.

"Very well," he said, running his hand into her hair. "Skywalker it is," he said.

Padmé smiled, and took his face into her hands. "Welcome back, Anakin Skywalker," she said, kissing him softly on the mouth.

The next morning

"So what are you going to do on Bespin, anyway?" Luke asked his parents at breakfast the next morning.

Padmé and Anakin exchanged an amused look, while Obi-Wan's face turned pink with embarrassment.

"Oh, I'm sure we'll find something to keep us busy," Anakin told his son with a smile. 'Obi-Wan is going to keep the two of you busy while we're gone as well,' he added. "I've asked him to start training you both in the ways of the Force."

"Really?" Leia exclaimed. "That's awesome!"

Obi-Wan smiled. "I'm looking forward to it," he said. "It's been a long time since I had a padawan."

"And now you'll have two," Anakin said with a smile. "Who are about the same age as I was when you took me on as your padawan," he added.

Obi-Wan nodded. "Yes, that's right," he agreed.

"Was Dad a good padawan?" Luke asked.

"Well... most of the time," Obi-Wan replied, looking at Anakin. 'We had our share of challenges along the way,' he continued, "but we muddled through, didn't we?"

Anakin nodded, neither man wanting to dwell on the dark chapter that had destroyed their friendship for ten years. "There's something you should know," he told Luke and Leia. "As soon as we return to the capital I'm going to change your names," he told them.

"You're changing our names?" Leia asked. "Why?"

“Because your mother and I both agree that it’s time you had your real name,” Anakin told them. “And that name is Skywalker.”

The twins’ eyes widened in an identical manner. Neither could have been more surprised or more delighted by their father’s announcement.

“Does that mean you’re going to be known by *your* real name now, too?” Luke asked his father tentatively.

Anakin nodded. “Yes,” he replied. He looked at Padmé. “It’s time,” he added.

The twins couldn’t have agreed more.

Chapter 88

Eighty-eight

En route to Bespin

"We should be there in about six hours," Anakin told his wife as he entered the ship's passenger lounge.

"Wonderful," she said as he sat down beside her. "I hope the twins are good for Obi-Wan," she added.

Anakin smiled. "If he could handle me, he can handle them," he replied. "Besides, they're good kids."

"Yes, true," she agreed. "I think it means a lot to Obi-Wan that you trust him with Luke and Leia," she told him.

"I know it does," Anakin replied. 'I owe him my life, Padmé,' he told her. "Palpatine had me at his mercy and would have killed me if Obi-Wan hadn't been there."

Padmé smiled. "I can't tell you how much it means to me to see the two of you growing close again," she said. "You two were like brothers," she added.

Anakin nodded. "I know," he said, frowning. "When I think of what I did..." he stopped. "I'm not sure I can ever make up for what I did, Padmé; to him, to you..." He stopped, not even sure how to put into words his remorse for what he'd done to the Jedi.

Padmé listened, sensing that he needed to get this out. "I know," she said finally, reaching over and taking his hand.

Anakin held her hand in his, his eyes lowered to look at it. "I'm not sure you do, Angel," he said quietly. 'I'm not sure anyone can know what it is I'm feeling, what I'm going through.' He looked up at her. "I want to be the man I was, but...that man is gone. After everything I did, everything I went through, I don't know if that man can ever exist again." "Perhaps not," she acknowledged. "But becoming a different man who has learned from the mistakes of his past is a good thing too," she told him.

Anakin nodded. "Yes, I suppose it is," he agreed. *But to learn from the past I must be willing to face the past... all of it,* he thought. *I'm not certain I will ever be able to do that...*

Padmé smiled. "I think we need to focus on the future, Ani," she told him. "Tomorrow is our fourteenth wedding anniversary. And we're together to celebrate it. I didn't think we would ever celebrate another anniversary again, and yet here we are."

"Yes, here we are," he replied, drawing her over to sit on his lap. 'If someone had told me a year ago that we'd be together on our anniversary this year, I would have thought him crazy,' he told her. "Now we have the rest of our lives together, Padmé," he added, wrapping his arms around her. "Many, many more anniversaries to celebrate."

Padmé smiled. “Yes,” she replied. “And hopefully many other things to celebrate as well,” she added.

Anakin nodded. “I predict that we’ll have a new member of our family when we celebrate our fifteenth anniversary,” he told her with a smile.

“Do you think so?”

“Yes,” he replied. “Maybe even two.”

Padmé’s eyes widened. “Two?” she asked. “You mean...more twins?”

“Well, you had a dream we had twins, didn’t you?” he asked.

“Yes, but I’m not you,” she replied. “My dreams don’t mean anything.”

“Don’t be so sure,” he told her. “That dream could very well be a portent of things to come.”

“I hope so, Ani,” she said, taking his face in her hands. “Nothing would make me happier than to have more children with you.”

Anakin smiled. “Well, we know what causes that to happen, you know,” he told her.

“What do you mean?”

“We know what causes children to happen,” he told her, nuzzling the side of her neck.

Padmé laughed. “Yes, we do,” she agreed. “We’re rather good at it too, I’d say.”

“Yes I’d have to agree with you there,” he replied, planting a kiss on her chin. “But you know what they say: practice makes perfect.”

“You think we need more practice?” she asked.

“You can never get too much,” he told her with a straight face.

Padmé laughed as she wrapped her arms around his neck. “No, that’s certainly true,” she said, and then moved closer to kiss him.

Naboo

“Well younglings, what shall we do this afternoon?” Obi-Wan asked Luke and Leia as they finished lunch.

“Can we go swimming?” Leia asked.

Obi-Wan had never particularly enjoyed swimming, and hadn’t owned a pair of swim trunks in many years. “Well... I suppose so,” he replied. “So long as you don’t expect me to join you,” he added.

“You don’t know how to swim?” Luke asked. “We can show you,” he offered.

Obi-Wan smiled. “That’s very kind of you,” he replied. ‘I know how to swim, Luke. I simply don’t have any swim trunks with me,’ he explained. “I didn’t realize that I would be watching the two of you in your parents’ absence.”

“Well... why don’t we go shopping and buy you some?” Leia suggested. “There are some cool shops not far from here. I’m sure we could find some for you, Obi-Wan.”

Obi-Wan looked at the twins, each of whom was looking up at him expectantly. *How can I say no to them?* He thought.

“That’s a wonderful idea,” Obi-Wan said finally. “Let’s go shopping.”

Bespin

Anakin and Padmé were welcomed warmly by the hotel’s concierge, who summoned droids at once to carry their bags up to their suite. Padmé was not at all surprised by the fact that Anakin had selected the most luxurious hotel in Cloud City for their stay; for clearly he was bent on spoiling her as he had never been able to do before.

“Ani, this is incredible!” Padmé said as the droid showed them into their suite.

“Only the best for my Angel,” he told her with a smile.

The suite was two levels, with a grand staircase in the middle of the room leading up to the enormous bedroom upstairs. The main level consisted of a huge sitting area with a large picture window looking out over the city, decorated with the finest furniture and artwork.

“Look at the view,” Padmé said, standing in front of the large window and looking out at the spectacular cityscape before her.

Anakin came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. “Fantastic, isn’t it?” he asked.

Padmé nodded, leaning back against him. “Pity we only have two days here,” she said.

Anakin kissed the top of her head. “Well, you know, we could extend it,” he told her.

“But what about the kids?” she asked.

“Obi-Wan can handle them,” he assured her. “And I’m sure he wouldn’t mind at all.”

Padmé smiled, sorely tempted to take him up on his offer. “Well... I’ll think about it,” she said.

“Maybe there’s something I can do to help convince you,” Anakin said, nuzzling her neck.

Padmé closed her eyes. “You always were very good at talking me into things,” she told him.

Anakin smiled. “Well... most of the time,” he replied. “It took me a while to convince you to marry me.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “But you did it, despite all the obstacles in our way.”

“I knew that we belonged together,” he told her. ‘We were made for one another, Angel. When we were apart I was empty inside,’ he continued. “You complete me, Padmé.”

Padmé turned around in his arms, running her hands up to rest on his shoulders. “I feel the same way,” she told him. “The ten years that we were apart were like an eternity. And even

though I hated Darth Vader when I believed the twins were dead, I still felt incomplete without you.”

Anakin took her face in his hands with a smile. “You know, Angel,” he said, ‘I understand that there’s a hot tub upstairs,’ he told her. “Shall we try it out?”

Padmé smiled. “That’s a wonderful idea,” she replied.

Anakin took her hand and kissed it, and then lead her to the staircase.

Naboo

Obi-Wan was beginning to regret his decision to go shopping. The twins had brought him to a rather modern shop where most of the clothes were extremely loud and somewhat inappropriate for a man of his years.

“How about these, Obi-Wan?” Leia asked, holding up a rather immodest pair of bright yellow trunks. “Or these?” she asked, holding up an even louder pair of bright purple ones.

“Er... perhaps another color would be better,” he said, trying to be diplomatic.

“What about these?” Luke offered, holding up a pair of neon green ones.

Obi-Wan was stymied, unsure how to tell the twins that he wouldn’t be caught dead in any pair.

“Can I help you, sir?” a sales clerk asked, appearing at Obi-Wan’s elbow.

“Is there a place he can try these on?” Leia asked, taking all three pairs of trunks and thrusting them at the clerk.

“Yes of course,” he replied. “Of course, we’d ask that your grandfather keep his... undergarments on while trying them on,” he said.

Luke and Leia giggled as Obi-Wan’s face went as red as a mon calamari.

“He’s not our grandfather,” Luke said. “But I’m sure he’ll keep his undies on, right Obi-Wan?”

Obi-Wan wanted to crawl under a rock by this point, and simply nodded weakly at Luke’s question.

“Right this way, sir,” the clerk said, leading Obi-Wan towards the fitting rooms. Obi-Wan simply followed along, making a mental note to make Anakin pay dearly for this humiliating episode.

Cloud City

“Now this is wonderful,” Padmé said as she and Anakin relaxed into the warm bubbly water of the hot tub.

“A toast, Milady,” Anakin said, handing her a champagne flute. ‘To my beautiful bride,’ he continued, “the love of my life.”

Padmé smiled and touched her glass to his. She took a sip of the champagne; the finest vintage Cloud City had to offer.

"You know," she said, "I don't think we've ever been able to celebrate our anniversary openly, have we?"

Anakin shook his head as he set his glass down on the tiled edging around the large tub. "No, we haven't," he agreed. "Although the two anniversaries we did celebrate, we did a lot of celebrating as I recall," he said with a smile.

Padmé laughed. "Yes, we did," she agreed. 'It was so hard to keep things quiet,' she told him. "When you were away at the war and everyone was talking about you, it nearly drove me crazy. There were so many times when I just wanted to shout it from the rooftops. But of course, I couldn't."

Anakin nodded. "I know what you mean," he replied. 'Every time we came back to Coruscant I had to think of some excuse to leave the temple to go to see you,' he remembered. "There were times I was so desperate to be with you that I said just about anything to get to you." He smiled. "I'm amazed Obi-Wan never suspected what I was up to."

"Obi-Wan has always been so conservative and straight laced," she reminded him. "He never would have guessed where you going or what you were doing."

"No," Anakin agreed. "I remember when I was starting to grow up I'd ask him about what was going on with my body, about the changes I was going through, and he'd always look like he wanted to disappear into a black hole."

Padmé laughed. "I'm sure," she replied. 'Poor Obi-Wan,' she said. "I just hope Luke and Leia are kind to him. He's not as young as he used to be."

"Don't worry," he told her, moving over to her. 'Obi-Wan can handle anything, trust me. Besides, I don't want to talk about Obi-Wan anymore,' he told her. "In fact, I don't want to talk at all," he added, leaning closer to her and kissing her.

Padmé wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back.

Naboo

Obi-Wan stood in front of the mirror in his bedroom, a feeling of extreme uneasiness filling his stomach as he looked at his reflection. *What the devil were you thinking, old man?* He thought as he looked at himself in the mirror. The trunks he'd ended up purchasing, the least offensive of the ones that the twins had selected, were bright green with a rather strange design that resembled exploding stars all over them in a contrasting purple color. Despite their loudness, the trunks were at least more modest than the others that the twins had chosen. *I am going to burn these the moment I leave this planet*, he thought resolutely, knowing that if Anakin ever saw them he would never let him live it down. *This negates every single time you saved my life, Skywalker*, he thought with a frown. *If fact, you owe me one now*, he decided.

"Obi-Wan are you coming?"

Obi-Wan heard Leia's voice in the corridor outside his room and knew that he couldn't delay any longer. "Yes, I'm coming," he called back. Picking up his cloak he put it on and cinched it tightly around him to hide the offending garment for as long as possible.

“Come on!” Luke said, grabbing Obi-Wan by the hand as soon as he appeared outside his door. “Let’s go, Obi-Wan!”

Obi-Wan let the boy lead, or rather drag him down the corridor and outside. *Please, please let it rain*, Obi-Wan thought miserably as they made their way down to the beach. It was going to be a long afternoon.

Chapter 89

Eighty-nine

Cloud City

Later that afternoon Anakin and Padmé decided to check out the shops in the vicinity of their hotel. Both agreed that they needed to return home to the twins with many gifts for each. Padmé had also decided that Anakin's wardrobe needed some expanding, and so she'd lead him to the men's department in one of the shops.

"This isn't necessary," Anakin told her as he stood by, watching her look through the clothes.

"Yes it is," she replied. "I already bought you quite an extensive wardrobe, but it's back on Coruscant."

Anakin frowned. "You did?" he asked.

"Yes, it's part of your anniversary gift," she told him, holding up a pair of trousers to show him.

"Part of it?" he asked.

Padmé smiled. "You're not the only one with a surprise," she told him.

"I can see that," he replied. "So if you bought me clothes, why do I need more?"

Padmé looked up at him. "You can never have too many clothes, Anakin," she told him.

Anakin laughed. "Is that your way of telling me you'd like to do some shopping for yourself, now?" he asked.

Padmé smiled. "You always could read my mind," she told him.

Anakin merely sighed as he followed her to the women's department, carrying the garments she had picked out for him.

Naboo

An afternoon of swimming with the twins of Anakin Skywalker turned out to be far more of an adventure than Obi-Wan Kenobi had known in his nearly fifty years. First they coerced him, in a manner eerily reminiscent of their father, to swim out to the island with them. And while he managed to get there without suffering a heart attack, he made the mistake of taking a nap on the beach when the twins went off to explore on the island. When he woke up, he found that he'd been buried in sand up to his shoulders.

"Did you have a nice nap, Obi-Wan?" Leia asked cheerfully as she smoothed down the sand that was trapping his left arm.

"Well... yes," he replied. "I must insist that you dig me out of here at once, though," he added, doing his best not to sound too stern.

Luke smiled. "We buried our dad yesterday," he told the Jedi as he smoothed the sand on Obi-Wan's right arm. "He used the Force to get out. It was awesome!"

"Did he now?" Obi-Wan replied. *Show off...*

"Yes he did," Leia said. 'We figured you could do it too,' she added. "Since you're a Jedi."

"You can, can't you?" Luke asked, starting to grow doubtful.

"Of course I can," Obi-Wan replied, not wishing to be outdone by his former pupil. "Just give me a moment to prepare," he added, closing his eyes to concentrate. Within a few moments the sand started to move, and then lifted off of Obi-Wan, swirling in the air above him before blowing out towards the lake. Luke and Leia clapped enthusiastically at the performance as Obi-Wan sat up, brushing the sand from his torso as he did so.

"That is so cool," Luke said.

"The Force isn't really meant to play games with, younglings," Obi-Wan told them gently.

"Dad shows us cool stuff all the time," Leia informed him.

Obi-Wan smiled. "Yes, I'm sure he does," he replied. "He always did have a playful side."

"So when he was a kid he liked to do fun stuff?" Luke asked.

Obi-Wan nodded. "Yes he did," he replied. "He enjoyed playing tricks, too. I can't tell you how many times he played tricks on me over the years."

Luke and Leia both widened their eyes upon hearing this. "Tell us!" Leia asked excitedly. "What did he do?"

Obi-Wan hesitated for a moment, unsure he ought to be giving the already precocious ten year olds any ideas. But then again... *it would serve him right if they tried some of those tricks on him.*

"Oh there are so many stories, where do I begin?" Obi-Wan asked as the twins settled down beside him in the sand. "Let me think now...."

Cloud City

Anakin stood waiting outside the dressing room, waiting as patiently as he was able while Padmé tried on some clothes. He had never enjoyed shopping, and had only agreed to go with his wife as part of his efforts to make their anniversary celebration as pleasant as possible. If he were to be totally honest with Padmé, he'd tell her that he would rather be anywhere except where he was, standing in a women's boutique, trying not to look uncomfortable surrounded by racks of ladies unmentionables.

"Excuse me, but are you Anakin Skywalker?"

Anakin looked up from the rather enticing looking negligee he was picturing Padmé in to a pair of young women who looked to be in their twenties. They were looking at him with expressions of undisguised admiration and awe on their faces.

"Maybe," he said simply, looking from one to the other. "Why do you ask?"

"We've been studying the history of the Clone Wars in school," one young woman told him.

"Since we're not under the Empire's jurisdiction we get to hear the real story, not the imperial propaganda," the second one put in.

"And we were just reading about the Battle of Praesitlyn," the first one spoke up again. "And all that you did to win that battle. It was....incredible."

Anakin shrugged, not having thought about that chapter in his life in a long time. "I did what I had to do," he said simply.

"So you *are* Anakin Skywalker!" the second woman gushed. "I can't believe it!"

"Everyone thinks you died in the Purges," her companion explained. "How did you survive?"

"I... managed," Anakin replied.

"I'm sorry if this sounds, well, forward," one of the women said with a smile. "But you're even more handsome in person than you are in the holovids," she said, giving him a warm smile.

"Ani?"

Anakin looked up to see Padmé standing behind the two women, an armful of clothing in her arms.

"All set?" he asked her.

Padmé nodded, looking at the two women who were regarding her with open curiosity and even jealousy.

"Great," Anakin said. 'If you'll excuse me, ladies,' he said. "My wife and I have dinner plans."

The two women looked at one another in shock at the mention of the word *wife*, and then watched as Anakin and Padmé walked away.

Naboo

"It sounds like you and Dad were really good friends," Luke commented as he, Leia and Obi-Wan sat at dinner that evening. Obi-Wan had spent the better part of the afternoon telling the twins all about his friendship with their father. Luke and Leia had listened with rapt attention to all the details, marveling over what a remarkable child their father had been.

"We were," Obi-Wan replied. 'Like brothers, really,' he added with a wistful smile. "I only wish I'd been aware of what he was going through."

"You had no idea that he was married to our mom?" Leia asked.

"No, they were both very careful not to let their secret out," Obi-Wan replied. "It was strictly against the Jedi Code to be married, and Anakin knew this. He knew that he would be expelled from the Order for being married, and went to great lengths to keep his relationship with your mother a secret."

"That must have been hard to do," Luke remarked. "I mean, they're always so kissy kissy with each other," he added.

Obi-Wan smiled. "They're obviously very much in love, Luke," he explained. "And now that they no longer need to hide how they feel, it's natural that they'd be like that."

"Yeah, I guess," Luke replied. 'I just wish they wouldn't do it *all* the time,' he complained. "It freaks me out."

Leia giggled.

"Your father has asked me to begin training you as Jedi," Obi-Wan said, changing the subject. "Perhaps we could begin this afternoon," he added.

"That's a great idea," Leia spoke up. "Too bad it's raining now," she added.

"Yes, a great pity," Obi-Wan replied, secretly grateful that he'd managed to avoid wearing the trunks again. "Come, let's go find a quiet place so we can begin."

Cloud City

"Is everything to your liking?"

Anakin and Padmé looked up from their meal to their serving droid.

"Yes, everything is excellent, thank you," Padmé replied.

"May I pour you more wine, Milady?" the droid asked, picking the bottle up out of the ice bucket.

"Yes you may," Padmé replied. It had been quite a while since she'd been waited on in this manner, and she was thoroughly enjoying herself.

"Sir?" the droid asked, offering Anakin more wine.

"None for me," he replied.

"Don't like the wine?" Padmé asked as the droid walked away.

"It's not that," he replied. 'I guess I'm just not accustomed to alcohol any more,' he told her. "I don't want to be falling asleep too early," he added with a smile.

Padmé laughed. "I see," she replied. 'It's very good,' she added. "Almost as good as Naboo wine."

Anakin nodded. "Alderaani," he said, looking at the bottle. "I guess there are some good things to come from that planet," he remarked.

Padmé looked at him with a shake of her head. "Alderaan is a beautiful place, and you know it," she said.

"I suppose," he admitted. "I guess I'm just a little biased when it comes to that particular planet."

"Understandably," Padmé replied.

"Damn it, I just remembered something," Anakin said.

"What's that?" she asked.

"I meant to ask Obi-Wan about the conversation he had with Organa," he told her. "And I completely forgot to."

"I guess you had other things on your mind," she replied.

"Yes, I suppose so," he agreed. 'Obi-Wan said it wasn't pleasant,' he told her with a frown. "I can't believe that man is still feeling sorry for himself," he added, shaking his head.

"How do you know he is?" Padmé asked. 'Why don't you wait until you talk to Obi-Wan before you jump to conclusions?'

"Very well," Anakin replied, picking up her hand.

"Besides, I don't want to talk about Bail Organa," she told him. "This is our time, Ani; let's not spoil it with talk of him."

Anakin smiled. "You're right," he replied, kissing her hand. "We'll deal with Organa and his treacherous allies later," he said.

Padmé nodded, glad that he'd changed the subject, but uneasy with his comment. *Treacherous allies? Who is he talking about? The Senate? The Rebel Alliance? Or both?*

"Can I offer you a dessert menu?" the serving droid asked as it appeared at the table once more.

Anakin checked his wrist chrono. "No, just the bill," he said. "We have tickets for the opera tonight," he told his wife.

Padmé smiled. "You hate the opera," she reminded him.

Anakin smiled. "True," he admitted. 'But I love you,' he added, kissing her hand again. "So I'll suck it up."

"Very brave of you," she told him.

"I know."

Naboo

Obi-Wan soon learned just how innately strong both Luke and Leia were, and it made him wonder what their medichlorian count was. He remembered back to the day when Qui-Gon Jinn had asked him to test Anakin's levels, and how shocked he'd been when the results had shown up on the computer screen. *If Luke and Leia are half as strong as their father, they'll be powerful Jedi indeed*, he mused.

"I have the mush," Luke announced as he joined Obi-Wan and his sister on the terrace.

"It's my turn to feed her," Leia reminded him.

"I know, I know," Luke said, handing the bowl to his sister.

Obi-Wan watched as the girl carefully spoon fed the small bird in their care. He had been impressed by the twins' patience and dedication to the care of the helpless little creature.

"Do you think we'll be able to bring her back to Coruscant with us?" Leia asked Obi-Wan.

"I suppose that will be up to your parents," he told her. "I don't think the wee thing will be ready to be left on her own before we leave," he added.

"No she won't," Luke agreed. "So we'll *have* to take her with us," he decided.

Obi-wan smiled. "Yes, I think we will," he agreed. "Have you decided upon a name yet?"

"No, we can't agree on one," Luke replied. "Leia wants to call her something girly, and I want her to have a cool name."

"Your suggestions aren't cool, Luke," Leia piped up. 'They're stupid.'
Luke frowned. "They are not!" he retorted.

"Killer? Spike? Monsterbird?" Leia responded. "Stupid, stupid and stupid."

"Now, now," Obi-Wan said, hoping to diffuse the situation before it got out of hand. "Let's not squabble, younglings. I'm sure you'll come up with a name that both of you can agree upon."

"Don't count on it," Luke muttered.

Cloud City

Anakin shifted in his chair once more, the fact that they were very comfortable and the box he and his wife were in very spacious not helping him enjoy the spectacle any more. He looked down to the huge crowd below them, all watching in rapt silence at the musical theatre piece on the stage.

Padmé glanced at him from the corner of her eyes, seeing how restless he was. Part of her felt badly for making him endure the opera, for he had never been able to sit still this long without going stir crazy. *But he bought the tickets*, she reminded herself. *This was his idea.*

"You okay, Ani?" she asked him quietly.

Anakin looked at her as he sat up in his chair. "Yes, great," he told her.

Padmé laughed. "Liar," she replied.

Anakin smiled. "That gown looks amazing on you," he told her, his eyes looking her over with open admiration.

"Thank you," she replied, looking back at the stage before he started giving her *the look*.

Anakin smiled as he thought of a way to pass the time more enjoyably. "You're wearing my favorite perfume," he said.

Padmé nodded, not daring to look at him.

Anakin could tell that she was going to be difficult to sway, but he was up to the challenge. "Pretty dark in here, isn't it?" he asked.

Padmé nodded again.

"Dark enough that no one could see us if we moved away from the railing," he continued.

"Why would we do that?" she asked. "We couldn't see the stage if we did."

“No...” he said, trying to formulate a plan of attack. Then he had an idea. Using the Force he pushed the chair rests up on both their chairs and moved over.

“You smell wonderful,” he said, picking up one hand and kissing up her arm slowly.

“Ani, we’re in public,” she said.

“It’s dark,” he reminded her, not stopping for a moment.

“That doesn’t negate the fact that we’re in public,” she said. “What if somebody sees what you’re doing?”

“You told me yesterday that you liked the thought of doing something dangerous,” he reminded her.

“I did,” she replied. “But...”

“But what?” he asked, sensing the subtle shift and moving closer to her.

“Anakin,” she said, her expression half scolding half pleading.

“You told me yesterday you found it exciting to do naughty things when there was a danger that you could be caught,” he reminded her, brushing his lips over her temple.

“Yes I did,” she said again, sounding less convincing. “But this is hardly the place for...”

“Don’t tell me you’re not as excited as I am right now,” he interjected.

Padmé knew the battle was lost, and turned to him. “Are you excited, Ani?” she asked him softly.

Anakin said nothing in response and drew closer to her and captured her mouth in a kiss.

The act ended, and the lights came up. A serving droid entered the box and stopped when he saw the two humans engaged in some sort of ritualistic activity involving the pressing of mouths. It had seen humans do such things before, and realized that it was simply part of their programming. So it left a tray of drinks on one of empty seats and left the humans alone, dimming the lights for them as it did so.

Chapter 90

Ninety

Naboo

Luke was full of anxiety as he made his way through the vast house. Leia was not with him, but he knew she was close by. Close by and safe. It was his mother that he was concerned about.

The rooms in the house seemed to go on forever, and although he could sense his mother's presence close by, he wasn't sure how long he would have to continue until he found her. He could feel her sadness clearly as he drew closer to her, and it filled him with sadness of his own. Something had happened, something big... even Luke in his innocence knew that his father was the reason for her sadness.

"Mom?" Luke said as he finally found his mother. She looked up when he entered the room, and Luke could see at once that she'd been crying a great deal.

"Are you okay?" Luke asked.

"No," his mother replied. "I'm not. Are you?"

Luke shook his head. "I miss him, Mom," he admitted tearfully.

"So do I," she replied as fresh tears started down her face. "More than anything."

"I don't understand, Mom," Luke said, sitting down on the bed beside his mother. "Why? Why does it have to be this way?"

Padmé said nothing in reply and simply covered her face with her hands and cried.

"Luke, Luke wake up!"

Luke opened his eyes and was startled to see his sister sitting on the side of his bed.

"What? What's going on?" he stammered as he sat up.

"You were yelling in your sleep," Leia told him, a look of concern on her face. "Were you having a bad dream?"

Luke nodded as the images from his dream flooded back to his mind. "It was Mom," he told his twin. 'She was really sad.' He looked up at Leia. "Why would I dream that, Leia? Mom and Dad are off on a vacation having fun."

"I don't know," she replied. "But this isn't the first time you've had a dream like that, is it?" she asked.

"No it's not," Luke replied. He frowned. "What does it mean, Leia?" he asked her.

Leia thought for a moment. "Why don't we ask Obi-Wan?" she suggested. "He'd probably be able to figure it out, Luke."

"Yeah, good idea," Luke replied, getting out of bed. "Let's go see if he's up."

Cloud City

"Breakfast is served, Milady," Anakin announced as he carried a tray into the enormous bedroom.

Padmé got out of bed as he set the tray on the round table on the other side of the room. She slipped Anakin's tunic that had been tossed on the floor the previous night and walked over to join him.

"This looks wonderful," she told him, wrapping her arms around him from behind.

"Only the best for my beautiful bride," he told her. He turned around in her embrace so he could return it. "Happy anniversary," he said, smiling down at her.

"Happy anniversary," Padmé replied, kissing him as he bended to her.

"Fourteen year ago today you made me the happiest man in the universe," he told her, taking her face in his hands.

Padmé smiled. "Did you ever dream we'd be celebrating our anniversary like this all these years later?" she asked.

"Never," he replied as he pulled a chair out for her. "Of course, a lot has changed since then," he added.

"Yes indeed," she agreed. "The galaxy has gone through a great deal of changes since that day."

Anakin nodded as he took his seat. "With more yet to come," he added.

"That sounds promising," she replied as she placed her napkin in her lap.

"The galaxy will only be safe again once the Rebel Alliance has been eliminated," he told her as he picked up his fork and looked over the meal before him. "They are like a parasite, Padmé. The galaxy is suffering because of their presence."

Padmé poured milk into her tea in silence as she listened to his words, a knot forming in the pit of her stomach as she did so.

"You sound like Darth Vader," she commented without looking up at him. "I thought he was gone."

Anakin was shocked by her comment and said nothing for a moment, and waited for her to look at him before he did so.

"I'm the emperor," he reminded her. "And as such I must do whatever necessary to ensure the safety and stability of my subjects. You were a queen, you must understand that."

Padmé's brow furrowed slightly. "I understand what it means to be a leader," she replied. "But I also know that peace isn't obtained at blaster point. There will never be peace if the Empire continues to oppress worlds and punish those who object to that oppression."

Anakin's first reaction was anger; but he swallowed that anger, knowing that it would serve no purpose. There had always been enormous differences in their ideologies; her

objections were certainly not surprising to him.

“Angel, it’s our anniversary,” he said, reaching out and putting his hand on hers. “Let’s not get bogged down in a political discussion.”

Padmé’s first reaction was indignation that he was patronizing her, but she swallowed her ire and forced herself to smile. “You’re right,” she replied. “This isn’t the time or the place for this conversation.”

Anakin nodded, picking up her hand and kissing it. “So what would you like to do today?” he asked.

Before Padmé had a chance to reply, the door chime to their suite sounded, and Anakin stood up. “I’ll be right back,” he said, seeming as though he was expecting someone.

Padmé stood up and walked over to the railing that overlooked the lower part of the suite as Anakin sprinted down the stairs. She watched as he opened the door and was surprised when several hotel lackeys entered the suite, each carrying a package in their hands.

“That’s it, bring them right in here,” Anakin commanded as the men commenced setting packages down on the tables, floor and sofa of the large sitting area. Padmé watched until the men left the suite, and then ran down the stairs, her curiosity getting the better of her.

“Ani what is all this?” she asked, looking around at all the packages.

“The rest of your gift,” Anakin replied, sitting down on one of the large chairs in the room. He smiled. “Happy anniversary,” he said.

“Anakin, this is too much!” she declared, looking around at all the packages. “This vacation is more than enough!”

“I disagree,” he replied. “Now are you going to open them? Or shall I do it for you?” he asked.

Padmé laughed. “I think I can manage,” she replied, sitting down on the sofa and picking up one of the packages.

It took Padmé nearly thirty minutes to open each of the gifts. She noticed that there were twelve of them, and felt certain that number was deliberate, for it represented the number of anniversaries that they’d been apart. Of course, the two anniversaries they’d spent together Anakin had never been able to buy her anything, being a Jedi padawan. It seemed he was now bent on making up for it, for the gifts he’d bought her were all extravagant and expensive. Designer gowns, priceless jewelry, a weekend for her, Leia, Sola and Sola’s daughters at Coruscant’s finest spa — Padmé could only imagine how much money he’d spent on her in this expression of love and generosity. *But if this helps him deal with the past, then who am I to question his thoughtfulness?*

Anakin watched with a smile as she ripped the gifts open, enjoying the look of excitement and wonder in her eyes as each package revealed another more luxurious treasure than the last. He was relieved that the disagreement they’d had had seemingly been forgotten, for the last thing he wanted was for their perfect time together to be marred by political disagreements. *You’ll see I’m right, Angel*, he thought with confidence. *You’ll see that I know what I’m doing.*

Naboo

Obi-Wan sat stroking his beard thoughtfully as he listened to Luke describe his dream. It unnerved him that the boy was having disturbing dreams, for it reminded him of Anakin when he was a boy. *He had dreams that usually ended up coming true*, he reflected grimly. He only hoped that this would not be the case with Anakin's son.

"Well, young Luke," Obi-Wan said finally, putting a hand on Luke's shoulder. "It seems to me that you have a lot of concerns about your family's well being."

"What does that mean, exactly?" Luke asked.

"It means that you're worried about your family," Obi-Wan explained gently. "And I think that given your extraordinary circumstances, the fact that you've spent the first ten years of your life estranged from your family that is a perfectly natural way to feel."

"So you don't think his dreams mean anything?" Leia asked. "That they're not going to come true?"

Obi-Wan looked at the girl, wishing he could give her a definitive *no* as a response. But that wouldn't be honest, and he was determined not to ever lie to any member of this family ever again.

"I can't say for sure, Leia," he replied. "The Force is always in motion, young ones. It is very difficult to say what the future holds. Personally I think that Luke here is just feeling a wee bit insecure," he continued, looking back at Luke. "And that once his life starts to normalize, the dreams will pass. They usually do in time."

Luke was relieved to hear this, for the thought that his mother could be sad to the extent he'd witnessed in his dreams was very painful to him. Even though he'd only known his mother for a few months, Luke knew that he would do anything to preserve her happiness and safety.

"Thanks Obi-Wan," Luke said finally. "I feel better."

Obi-Wan smiled. "Good," he replied. "Now then, are you both packed?" he asked. "We're due to leave for the capital shortly after breakfast."

"We're packed," Leia assured him. "I'm kind of looking forward to going back to school," she admitted with a smile.

Luke rolled his eyes. "Ugh," he said simply in response.

Obi-Wan chuckled, making a mental note to toss his swim trunks in the incinerator on the way out the door.

"Excuse me, Master Kenobi," Threepio said as he stepped into the room. "Master Anakin is on the comm and would like to speak with the children."

Luke and Leia jumped out of their seats and ran out of the room, both anxious to talk to their parents.

"Mom! Dad!" the twins exclaimed upon seeing the images of their parents on the screen.

"It's good to see you," Padmé said with a smile. "I hope you two are behaving yourselves."

"We are," Leia assured her. "Obi-Wan swam over to the island with us."

"Yeah we had to take him into town to buy some swimming trunks," Luke informed them. "But we found him some really cool ones. I think he likes them. He said he doesn't want to wear them out because they're so special."

Anakin was intrigued. "Oh?" he asked, glancing at his wife.

"They're really nice, Daddy," Leia told him. "A lovely shade of green."

"With big purple stars all over them," Luke added.

Anakin had to fight not to laugh out loud at the twins' description. "I really hope there's a holo of him wearing them," he told the twins. "I'd really love to see that."

"Yeah, I think Artoo did get some footage," Leia told them.

"Fantastic," Anakin replied with a smile.

"When are you coming back to the capital?" Luke asked them.

"Tomorrow," Padmé told them. "By the time you're back from school we ought to be home."

"Do we *have* to go back to school tomorrow?" Luke whined.

"Absolutely," Anakin replied. "School is important, end of discussion."

"I can't *wait* to go back to school," Leia declared, looking at Luke with a smile.

Luke rolled his eyes.

"Well we're going to see some of the sights," Padmé told the twins. "So we'll say goodbye now."

"We'll see you tomorrow," Anakin added. "Go easy on Obi-Wan."

"We will," Luke said.

"See you tomorrow," Leia added.

Padmé blew them each a kiss and then ended the transmission. Once the screen had gone dark, Anakin burst out laughing.

"I cannot *wait* to see those trunks," he told his wife.

Padmé laughed too. "Poor Obi-Wan," she replied. "He really had no idea what he was getting into when he agreed to watch Luke and Leia, did he?"

Anakin shook his head. "No, not a clue," he agreed. He stood up. "Well? Are you ready to hit the town?" he asked with a smile.

"Almost," she replied, standing as well. "I need to get dressed."

Anakin frowned. "You are dressed," he replied.

“Yes, but not for going out,” she returned as she headed up the stairs. “I won’t be long!”

“Where have I heard *that* before?” he muttered as he sat down, deciding he would have a long wait.

Chapter 91

Ninety-one

Cloud City

Anakin stood up as Padmé descended the stairs, taking in every centimeter of her. As much as he appreciated how beautiful she looked, it was difficult for him to accept that men would no doubt appreciate her beauty just as much. Anakin had always been possessive of her, and that possessiveness had only been augmented by the ten year separation they'd endured.

"You're beautiful," he told her, taking her hand as she reached the bottom of the staircase.

Padmé smiled. "Thank you," she replied. "This is one of the gowns you bought me," she told him, looking down at it.

Anakin nodded. "I recognize it," he replied. "You're not going to send these gowns back too, are you?" he asked her with a smile.

Padmé smiled. "You know why I did that, I hope," she replied.

"I think so," he replied, not entirely sure he did. "Shall we go?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm ready," she replied. 'Now remember, Ani,' she said as they started out the door. "No cheating."

Anakin frowned. "Cheating?" he asked. "I don't cheat."

"Using the Force to win is cheating," she reminded him.

Anakin sighed loudly. "I can't help using the Force," he replied. "It's like asking you to stop being beautiful," he added with a smile as they stepped into the lift.

Padmé shook her head. "Smooth," she replied.

"Thanks, I do try," he responded, his smile growing.

"Yes I know you do," she answered. 'I have an idea,' she said after a moment's thought. "If you win anything," she began.

"You mean *when* I win, Angel. When," he interjected.

Padmé sighed. "Yes, when you win," she relented, "we'll give whatever you win to charity. That's the only way I won't feel guilty about you having an unfair advantage."

Anakin smiled. "Very well," he agreed. "Does this mean you won't nag me about the Force?" he teased.

"I suppose so," she replied.

"Good," he replied. "Then let's try and have some fun."

The casino was very crowded when they arrived, with beings of all races and species doing their best to make some quick and easy money. Anakin noted with a scowl how much attention his wife earned as she walked into the large gaming room, and it took all his self restraint not to Force push every male in the room against the nearest wall. Padmé could feel his tension through their joined hands, and looked up at him.

“We’re here to have fun, remember?” she reminded him.

Anakin looked down at her. “I remember,” he said. “I just wish you didn’t look so damn sexy,” he told her.

Padmé laughed. “*You* bought the dress, Ani,” she pointed out.

“I know,” he replied. “I should have bought you something more conservative,” he added.

Padmé merely laughed again as they made their way over to a vacant table.

Coruscant

It was late when Obi-Wan and the twins arrived home. Luke and Leia didn’t argue at all about going to bed, for they were both quite tired from the long trip. Obi-Wan was tired too, but didn’t want to admit it. It had been a long time since he’d minded younglings, and while he’d cherished the time he’d spent with Luke and Leia, he was exhausted. *I’m getting too old for babysitting*, he decided as he sat down heavily in one of the large leather chairs in the living room.

“Kids wear you out?”

Obi-Wan looked up to see Han standing in the doorway, a knowing smile on his face.

“Well... no,” Obi-Wan replied. “It’s a long voyage from Naboo.”

Han nodded, not believing him for a minute. “I thought Jedi Knights never lied?” he quipped as he came in and took a seat across from Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan laughed. “Is it that obvious?” he asked.

“Yeah, it is,” Han replied. ‘And I know Luke and Leia,’ he added. “They’re great kids, but they never stop.”

“Yes, that’s certainly true,” Obi-Wan agreed, sitting back in the chair. “They remind me a great deal of their father at that age. He was never still for a moment.”

“That doesn’t surprise me at all,” Han replied. “So when are Lord and Lady Vader returning?”

“Tomorrow,” Obi-Wan replied. ‘But there’s something you need to know, Han,’ he continued. “Anakin has abandoned the name of Vader. He’s using his real name again, and has plans to change Luke and Leia’s surname to Skywalker as well.”

Han’s eyes widened in surprise upon hearing this. “Wow,” he said softly. ‘I... I can’t believe it,’ he said. “He really has changed, hasn’t he?”

Obi-Wan nodded. “Yes he has,” he agreed. “The Darkness is gone now, Han. I’m certain of it. I didn’t think it was possible for him to be redeemed, but he has been.”

Han nodded silently as he digested this. “So... what now?” he asked. “Is he still planning on being the emperor?”

“I think he’s still uncertain of what to do,” Obi-Wan replied. “Clearly he has some big decisions to make. He will have some serious soul searching to do before he can make them.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Han replied. “And if I know Lady V... I mean Skywalker, she’ll make sure he makes the right ones.”

Obi-Wan smiled. “You know her quite well I see,” he replied. “She’s a remarkable woman.”

Han nodded. “Sure is,” he agreed. ‘Well I’m going to bed,’ he said, standing up. “Those kids will take some coaxing to get them out of bed in time for school tomorrow,” he added.

“Yes, no doubt,” Obi-Wan agreed. ‘Good luck with that, Han,’ he added with a smile. “I’m officially retiring from my babysitting duties as of right now.”

“Thanks a lot,” Han replied. “Good night.”

“Sleep well.”

Cloud City

“Just once, Angel, I promise.”

“Anakin, I know you better than that. It’s never just once.”

“How can you say that? It’s been so long!”

“But...”

“I swear, just once and I’m done.”

Padmé sighed, trying not to smile at her husband who was acting more like their ten year old son than a thirty-two year old man. “Okay, okay,” she relented at last. “One race, and that’s all.”

Anakin grinned, and kissed her on the forehead. “You’re the best,” he said, and then tried not to run over to the swoop bike race simulator.

“Good luck!” she called after him as she sat down at their table.

Anakin waved back at her, and continued on his way.

“Can I get you anything, M’am?” the serving droid asked Padmé.

“Nothing for now,” Padmé replied, watching as Anakin disappeared into the crowd. She sighed, and rested her chin in her hand, wondering if she’d made a big mistake in pointing out the simulator to her husband. *But when was the last time he raced?* She asked herself. *He loves to race— it’s been a passion of his for his whole life. Who am I to try to deprive him of that joy?* With that thought in mind, Padmé made her way over to the simulator to watch the race that Anakin was about to take part in. He was just about to put on the simulation helmet when he saw her, and smiled.

“Here to make sure I don’t break my promise?” he asked with a smile.

"No, here to bring you luck," she said, reaching up on tiptoe to give him a kiss.

Anakin's smile grew. "Thanks Angel," he said. "Now I'm sure to win."

Padmé smiled.

A short time later

"I'd almost forgotten how much fun racing can be," Anakin told his wife as they made their way through the crowded casino.

"I'm sure Luke and Leia would enjoy it too," Padmé remarked.

"They would," he agreed, "if I ever let them do it."

Padmé looked up at him. "Surely you won't forbid them to do something you love so much," she said. "Imagine what would have happened if your mother had forbidden you from racing?"

Anakin considered this for a moment. "You and me might not be having this conversation right now," he replied.

"No, not too likely," she agreed.

Anakin nodded. "In that case, perhaps I ought to rethink my position on the twins racing," he said.

Padmé laughed. "Yes, I think so," she agreed.

"I can't even imagine what my life would have been like if I'd never left Tatooine," he said. "I never would have seen you again, I never would have become a Jedi, Luke and Leia would never have been born..."

"I'd probably have married Palo," she added, unable to resist teasing him.

Anakin frowned. "You *had* to mention him, didn't you?" he asked.

Padmé laughed again, linking her arm through his. "Have I ever told you how much fun you are to tease?" she asked.

Anakin smiled. "Yes, well two can play at that game, my love," he replied.

Padmé wasn't sure she liked the sound of that.

"Look, there's a spot available at the sabaac table," Anakin pointed out. "Let's go," he added, grabbing her hand.

"Are you both playing?" the droid dealing the cards asked as Padmé sat down in the chair Anakin pulled out for her.

Padmé looked up at Anakin. "No, I'm not," she replied. "I'm just here to watch."

"Are there any other players?" the droid asked.

No one spoke up, so it commenced dealing the cards.

Padmé looked around the table at Anakin's opponents, noting how the women seated around the large table were looking at Anakin with open admiration. She stared at them icily,

hoping they'd get the hint, but they seemed oblivious to her indignation and simply continued to look at Anakin from time to time, not seeming to care that he had arrived at the table with a woman.

Anakin was far too busy focusing on his cards to notice the admiring glances he was being favored with. It had been a few years since he'd played sabaac, but it soon came back to him.

"No reading their minds," Padmé said, leaning close to him. "That's cheating."

Anakin smiled. "I wasn't going to do that," he told her.

Padmé lifted an eyebrow.

"You never believe me," he sighed, looking back at his cards. He made a concerted effort not to read the minds of his opponents, he could not help but sense their emotions; and that alone was enough of an advantage to allow Anakin to win the first hand quite handily. And the second, the third... it was only after the fourth hand that he decided, at his wife's suggestion, that he let up and move on before someone began to suspect that he was counting cards.

"Six thousand credits," Anakin said as he and Padmé walked away from the table. "Can you believe that? Easiest money I've ever made."

"Just remember," she said, taking the credit stick from his hand, "that this is not ours."

"I know," he replied. "But it still feels good to win," he told her with a smile.

Padmé laughed. "I know," she replied. 'I'm going to the fresher,' she told him. "I'll be right back."

Anakin nodded and watched her go. No sooner had she left his side when he sensed someone at his side. He looked down to see one of the women he'd just played sabaac against. She smiled up at him, and he sensed once again the same feelings she'd exhibited earlier during the game.

"Hi there," she said. "My name's Kandi. What's yours?"

"Anakin," he replied, glancing towards the door where Padmé had disappeared, willing her to return as soon as possible.

"You know," she said, running a finger down his arm, "I've had my eye on you since you walked in the door."

"Is that so?"

Kandi nodded. "Uh huh," she said, her smile growing. 'You know, I don't think I've ever seen eyes as blue as yours,' she continued, stepping closer to him. "They're spectacular."

"Thanks," Anakin replied, feeling very uneasy. It had been a very long time since he'd been hit upon by a woman, and it was not an experience he welcomed, particularly with his wife in the vicinity.

"Why don't we go over to the bar?" she suggested. "You can buy me a drink."

Anakin scowled. "I don't think so," he replied. "I'm not alone. My wife is with me," he told her, feeling certain that the mention of a wife would extinguish all interest this woman had for him.

"She's not around right now, is she?" the woman asked. "Besides, I have a feeling that a man like you could never be happy with just one woman, am I right?"

"No, you're wrong, dead wrong," Anakin replied. "Now if you don't mind, leave me the hell alone, okay?" he said, walking away from her.

Kandi was left standing with an expression of shocked incredulity on her face, watching him as he walked away.

If Padmé had witnessed the exchange it would have only added to the jealousy she was already feeling. Not only had she been forced to watch two rather loose looking females openly ogling her husband at the sabaac table, but as she applied fresh lipstick in the fresher, she overheard an exchange between two stall occupants that made her blood boil even more.

"Six thousand, I've never seen anyone win so much!"
"He must be a professional, he certainly looks it."

"You could be right. I'd be willing to bet he's professional at a few things. Did you see those hands? I'd love to have them all over me, if you know what I mean."

Rude laughter. "Oh yes, I know what you mean. Hot, very hot. I wonder who that woman is that was with him?"

"Probably the flavor of the day. She's gorgeous, but I doubt a man that fine stays with one woman for too long."

"No, probably not. I wonder if there's a place I can sign up for *that*."

More rude laughter followed, at which point Padmé left the fresher, a deep scowl on her face. She found Anakin standing by the roulette table, amusing himself by stopping the wheel using the Force.

"I want to leave," Padmé said, standing beside him.

Anakin looked down at her with surprise. "What? Why?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

Padmé said nothing for a moment, not wanting to admit that she was jealous. "I don't like the way women are flirting with you," she said finally.

Anakin couldn't help but smile, which didn't make Padmé feel any better. "Angel," he said, wrapping his arms around her. "Don't tell me you're jealous!"

Padmé looked up at him with a frown. "So what if I am?" she asked. "You certainly would be if the tables were turned."

Anakin couldn't deny it—he knew he'd be irate if men were propositioning her the way he'd been propositioned.

"Padmé, it's our anniversary," he said at last. "We're here to have fun. Let's go catch a show at the club, maybe have a drink... what do you think?"

Padmé suddenly felt foolish for wanting to leave, and smiled.

“Okay,” she said. ‘I’m sorry,’ she added as they walked hand in hand to the exit. “I guess I’m maybe just a little insecure.”

Anakin frowned. “Insecure? You can’t be serious.”

“I am,” she told him. “You’re a very attractive man. I’m older than you, almost forty now. The women here are all so young, so pretty, so...”

“Stop right there,” he interrupted, turning to her again. “There is not a woman in the universe that can compare to you, Padmé. You are every bit as beautiful and desirable now as you were fourteen years ago.”

Padmé smiled, starting to feel better.

“Besides, don’t you know by now that there could never be another woman for me?” he continued, taking her face in his hands. “Other women just don’t exist for me, Angel. You’re my soul mate, my universe, a part of me.”

“Ani,” she said, wrapping her arms around his waist. “You always did know the right thing to say.”

Anakin smiled. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s go have some fun.”

They headed into the adjacent club and were shown to a table near the stage.

“See? This is going to be great,” Anakin said as he pulled out a chair for Padmé. ‘I’m going to the fresher before the show starts,’ he told her, bending and kissing her on the cheek. “Order me a drink.”

“Okay,” Padmé said. “Hurry back.”

Padmé watched as Anakin walked away, and then turned to the stage where a crew was starting to set up for the upcoming show. As she was doing so, a droid came over and set a rather exotic looking drink down on the table in front of her. She looked up at once.

“Excuse me, but I didn’t order this,” she told the droid.

“It comes with the compliments of the gentleman at the bar,” the droid explained, pointing in the direction of the bar.

Padmé looked over to the bar and saw a man waving at her, a smile on his face.

“I don’t want this,” she said, picking up the drink and handing it to the droid. ‘Take it back.’

“But it’s already been paid for,” the droid objected.

“I don’t care,” Padmé replied. “Take it back. Give it to him,” she said, nodding in the direction of the man at the bar.

The droid had no choice but to do what she asked, and took the drink back to the bar and returned it to the man, who was rather surprised to see it coming back to him. No sooner had the droid set it down before the man then he got up from his bar stool and walked right over to Padmé’s table.

“Great,” she muttered, looking towards the exit to see if Anakin was coming back.

“Excuse me, but is this seat taken?” the man asked as he came to stand beside Padmé’s table.

“Yes it is,” Padmé replied.

“It doesn’t look taken,” the man replied, giving her what he hoped was a debonair smile.

“Please leave me alone,” Padmé said. “My husband will be back any moment, and I assure you that he will not take kindly to your attention.”

The man merely smiled in reply, which soon faded when he saw a very large, very angry looking man come up to the table.

“Is there a problem here?” Anakin asked, glaring at the man angrily.

“Uh... no... none at all...” the man stammered.

“He sent me a drink, and I sent it back,” Padmé explained. “And I guess he didn’t like that,” she added, looking up at the now perspiring man.

“Is that so?” Anakin asked, folding his arms over his chest and fixing the man with his most lethal stare.

“Look, I meant no harm,” the man pleaded. “I-I-I-I’ll just go back to my seat. I’m very sorry to have bothered you, Ma’m,” he added, starting to leave.

The man scurried away, stumbling against a nearby chair, hitting himself squarely in the groin as he did so. Anakin smirked as he sensed the man’s intense pain, and sat down beside his wife.

“Asshole,” he muttered, glaring at the man as he hobbled his way back to the bar.

Padmé smiled. “See? I told you you’d be jealous,” she teased.

Anakin wasn’t amused. Padmé had to hold back her laughter at the expression on his face, and was relieved when the serving droid came over once more to take their orders.

The show started a short time later, a musical performance that both Anakin and Padmé enjoyed thoroughly very much. And yet, even during the performance, Anakin couldn’t help but keep an eye on the men who were nearby. He sifted through the minds of several of them, more than one of them having taken notice of Padmé and entertained what he considered inappropriate thoughts about her. These men were at a loss to understand how their drinks ended up in their laps.

“Ready to go?” Anakin asked, standing up as soon as the performance had concluded.

Padmé looked up at him. “You want to go?” she asked in surprise. “I thought you wanted to stay and have fun!”

Anakin frowned. “It’s not fun seeing men ogling you,” he replied. “Let’s go.”

Padmé shook her head as she stood up. “You’re really something,” she said as she allowed him to lead her to the exit.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“It’s okay for women to admire you, but men can’t admire me,” she told him. “Don’t you think that’s something of a double standard?”

“Of course it is,” he agreed. “But I’ve seen the thoughts in the minds of these men, Padmé. They’re lucky I didn’t send them flying across the room.”

“Shall I tell you about the conversation I overheard in the fresher?” she replied. “I may not be able to read minds, but I assure you I know how these women think.”

Anakin turned and looked at her, trying not to let his amusement show.

“Stop laughing,” she said, knowing him well enough to recognize the look in his eyes.

Anakin smiled. “I’m not laughing,” he assured her as they walked through the brightly lit corridors of Cloud City.

“Not on the outside,” she retorted.

“Ah, so you *can* read minds,” he teased.

Padmé looked up at him, not sure whether to be angry or to laugh along with him. But it had been so long since she’d seen him like this that she simply enjoyed the moment.

“You’re so bad,” she told him as they entered the hotel lobby. “What am I going to do with you?” she asked.

Anakin smiled. “Wait until we’re alone and I’ll tell you exactly what,” he told her as they stepped into the lift.

Padmé smiled. “Is that a promise?” she asked, running her hands up over his broad chest.

Anakin took her hands and kissed them, his eyes never leaving her. “Yes,” he told her. “It is.”

Padmé felt a thrill of excitement rush through her by the look in his eyes, and was suddenly very glad that they’d left the club.

Chapter 92

Ninety-two

Coruscant

Luke and Leia returned to school the next morning with a considerable amount of reluctance, and it took all of Han Solo's persuasive powers to get them out the door. However, once they arrived at Veslack, they were happy to see their friends, and excited to share with them all the changes that had transpired in their lives since before the break.

"I heard all about how your dad tried to save the emperor's life," one of the twins' friends told them as they filed into class. "That was really brave of him."

Luke and Leia knew better than to correct the girl's error, for that was what the public had been lead to believe.

"Yeah, he nearly died himself doing it too," Luke remarked.

"Is he okay?" another boy asked.

"He is now," Leia replied. "He had serious surgery and was in stasis for days, but he's okay now."

"He's better than okay," Luke added with a smile. "He doesn't have to wear the mask or suit any more."

"No way!" one of the children exclaimed. "That's awesome! What does he look like?"

"He looks a lot like Luke," Leia said, looking at her twin. "Except that he's older and handsome," she couldn't help adding with a smile.

Luke made a face at her in response.

The children made their way into the classroom, where Miss Zadane was waiting for them looking quite relaxed and tanned after her vacation. The first thing she had the students do was to share something about their break, since all of them wanted to talk all at once about how they'd passed their break.

"I'm going first," Leia said to her twin, wanting to be the one to tell the class of all that had happened on Kamino.

"I'm older," Luke pointed out. "I should go first!"

"Who cares if you're older," Leia retorted. "I'm going first!"

"Luke, Leia," Miss Zadane intervened. "Is there a problem?"

Both twins looked up at their teacher, feeling embarrassed as they felt all eyes on them.

"It's just that... we both want to tell about our vacation," Leia said.

The teacher nodded in understanding. "It must have been pretty spectacular for you to be fighting over who gets to share it," she observed.

"It was," Luke replied. "Our father got hurt and had surgery and now he doesn't have to wear the mask anymore," he blurted out in one rush of words.

"LUKE!" Leia said in annoyance.

Miss Zadane smiled, knowing she would have to diffuse the situation before it got any worse.

"That's wonderful news," she said, looking back at Leia. "You must be so excited to finally see your father's face."

Leia nodded. "I have a holo of him and our mom on Naboo," she said, effectively one-upping her twin. "We went there after he recovered. Would you like to see it?"

"Yes, I would like that very much," the teacher responded. "I think we'd all like that, wouldn't we children?" she asked the rest of the students. They were all most enthusiastic in their response.

With a smile Leia pulled her holo-album out of her backpack, giving Luke a smug smile as she did so. She flipped through the different stored photos in the device until she found one of her parents on the beach. She smiled and handed it to her teacher. "There he is," she said proudly. "Isn't he handsome?" she asked.

Miss Zadane took the album from Leia and looked at the holo, doing her best not to react too strongly when she got a look at Leia's father's face. *Whoa, he's...gorgeous*, she thought with surprise, never having imagined the face under the infamous black mask could possibly be so beautiful. She looked up at the twins, who were watching her closely, each of them sensing her strong reaction. "You resemble him quite a bit, Luke," she said finally.

Luke smiled. "Yeah I know," he replied, his pride showing clearly.

Miss Zadane passed the holo around so that each of the students could take a look. *The other staff won't believe this*, she thought as she watched the students all react with surprise to seeing the face of the infamous Darth Vader.

En route to Coruscant

"Looks like we'll be arriving back in time to pick up the kids," Anakin told Padmé as he joined her in the passenger lounge.

"Good," she replied. "I can't wait to see them."

Anakin smiled. "You must really miss them," he remarked. "I couldn't even talk you into extending our stay in Cloud City."

"I suppose it's just because I was away from them so long," she explained. "I know it sounds silly, but there's still a part of me that is afraid I'm going to lose them again."

"It's not silly at all," he assured her. 'I have the same fear about all three of you,' he continued. "I can't imagine how I'd live without you now," he told her. "I can't imagine how I lived ten years without you."

Padmé nodded. "I know, I feel the same way," she replied. "So are you ready for the staff and students of Veslack to see your face?"

Anakin nodded. "I believe so, yes," he replied. A smile spread across his face. "I'm particularly looking forward to seeing Mr. Wagar," he added.

Padmé laughed. "I'm sure you are," she replied. 'I personally can't wait for a few rather callous individuals to see you,' she said, remembering the unpleasant conversation she'd walked out on when she was still on staff at Veslack. "They'll have some egg on their faces, I'm sure."

"What are you talking about?" Anakin asked.

Padmé proceeded to relate the conversation to him, leaving nothing out. Anakin actually found it rather amusing, especially the remark about the trap door.

"He wasn't that far off, actually," he told her with a smile. "If you recall, it did take some rather creative maneuvering to have sex when I was still in that damn suit."

Padmé smiled. "Yes, but it was worth the effort," she assured him.

"Most definitely," he told her. "I never would have imagined that was possible."

"Well you said yourself that the equipment was working," she reminded him.

Anakin nodded. "Yes, true," he replied. "That part of me wasn't damaged."

Padmé smiled. "Thank the Maker for that," she replied.

Anakin smiled. "You know what it does to me when you look at me that way," he told her.

"Yes I do," she replied, continuing to smile. "How long did you say until we reach Coruscant?"

"About an hour," he told her.

"Perfect," she said, standing up and sitting down in his lap. "That gives us plenty of time."

Anakin wrapped his arms around her. "Yes, it certainly does," he agreed as he pulled her closer to kiss her.

Veslack Academy two hours later

The security guards recognized the speeder as it pulled up to the gate. It was certainly not unusual for a parent to pick up their child before the end of the day, and they were not about to remind Lord Vader that the bell didn't ring for 30 more minutes. However, when Lady Vader exited the speeder accompanied by a tall, very blond, very broad man, they were both perplexed.

"Good afternoon, Lady Vader," one of the guards said, opening the gate for her.

"Good afternoon," Padmé replied. "We're here to pick up our children."

The guard looked at the man at her side. "Uh... *your* children?" he asked.

"Yes, this is my husband," Padmé replied. "I realize you've never seen him without his mask, but..."

"No, I haven't," the man interjected. "And I'd be remiss if I didn't take measures to verify your identity, sir," he added, looking at Anakin.

"Of course," Anakin replied, impressed that the man had the gumption not to simply give in.

"I can assure you that this is my husband," Padmé spoke up in a rather irritated tone. "Why would I lie?"

"I'm not saying you're lying, Milady," the guard replied. "But you could be being coerced, for all I know. Lord Vader's children are high profile individuals. There are plenty of people who wouldn't think twice about using you to get to them."

"The man has a point," Padmé admitted, looking up at Anakin.

Anakin nodded. "Luke and Leia will know me," he said. "And if I am coercing their mother, they'll know it."

The guard nodded. "Agreed," he said. "I'll get them out of class," he said, indicating his comlink.

The second security guard waited with Anakin and Padmé as his comrade walked over to meet Luke and Leia.

"I guess we can't say their security is lax," Anakin commented.

"No, it certainly isn't," Padmé agreed.

"Mom! Dad!"

Anakin and Padmé turned to see their twins running towards them. The security guards seemed convinced by this point, and let Anakin and Padmé join their twins at the school's main doors.

"When did you get back?" Leia asked as the four exchanged hugs.

"Just a short time ago," Padmé told her. "We came straight here."

"You *have* to come in, Dad," Luke told Anakin. "We told everybody about your surgery. I hope that's okay."

Anakin nodded. "Of course," he replied, looking at Padmé. "I'm sure they're all quite curious to see what I look like now."

"Our class already knows," Leia explained as they entered the building. "We showed them a holo from Naboo."

"I see," Anakin replied. "Speaking of holos, please tell me you have one of Obi-Wan wearing those swimming trunks you told us about."

"Ani!" Padmé chided.

"What? Oh come on, don't tell me you're not dying to see them too," Anakin said with a smile.

Padmé shook her head. "You're terrible," she said.

“Come on, let’s go in the class,” Leia said, taking her father’s hand and yanking him into the room.

“We don’t want to interrupt,” Padmé said.

“You’re not,” Luke assured her. “It’s the end of the day. Come on!”

Miss Zadane was checking the children’s homework agenda’s when Anakin and Padmé walked into the room. She looked up when she saw someone enter the room and did a double take when she saw who it was.

“See Miss Zadane?” Leia said, dragging her father over to her. “I told you he was handsome!”

Anakin simply smiled, which only made Miss Zadane even more speechless.

“It’s nice to see you again, Miss Zadane,” he said, amused by the thoughts running through her mind.

“Yes it is,” she replied. “I mean... it’s nice to see you too. Really see you. I mean, you know... without the mask. To see your face. It’s very nice... I mean you look... you look very well, Lord Vader,” she stammered, growing redder in the face with each awkward syllable.

“Thank you,” Anakin said, rescuing her at last. ‘I wanted to let you know that I have started using my real name, my birth name,’ he told her. “And that we will be legally changing the twins’ name as well.”

“I see,” Miss Zadane replied, doing her best not to notice how tanned he was, how blond his thick hair was, or how blue his eyes were. “Thanks for letting me know.”

Padmé could see how flustered the woman was and decided to step in. “The name is Skywalker, by the way,” she informed the teacher.

“Okay, I will make sure I enter that name in Luke and Leia’s records,” the teacher told Padmé. “Thank you.”

“Is it okay if we leave with our parents?” Luke asked.

“Yes of course,” Miss Zadane replied. “Have a good evening.”

“Thank you,” Padmé replied. “Get your things, kids,” she said to Luke and Leia who ran to get their backpacks as their parents went outside to wait in the corridor.

“You know, there’s something I left in my office when I was here,” Padmé told Anakin as they stood there waiting for the twins. “In my haste to clear my things out I forgot it.”

“What is it?” he asked.

“A holo of my parents,” she told him. “It was on the top of my filing cabinet. I hope no one threw it out.”

“Why don’t we go and look when the kids come out?” he suggested.

Padmé nodded. “Yes, let’s do that,” she replied. “I’d hate to have lost it. It was my favorite holo of them,” she told him.

Anakin could feel the deep sorrow that still beset her whenever her thoughts turned to her parents. He could completely relate, for thinking of his own mother still saddened him deeply even so long after her death.

"All set!" Leia declared as she and Luke emerged from the classroom.

"Your mother wants to check in her old office for something," Anakin told them.

"Who is the new councilor?" Padmé asked them as they started down the corridor.

"Some joker," Luke replied.

"Joker?" Padmé asked.

"You've been spending too much time with Han Solo," Anakin observed.

Luke smiled. "I like Han," he replied. "He's cool, and he doesn't just treat us like annoying kids."

"I like Han too," Anakin said. "He's been invaluable through all that's happened lately."

"You should give him a raise, Daddy," Leia suggested.

Anakin smiled down at her. "Perhaps I will," he replied as they reached the office.

There were two others in the office besides the new councilor, and all looked up with surprise when appeared in the doorway.

"Excuse me," she said, looking at the joker she guessed was her replacement. "I used to work here, and I believe I left something here."

"Oh? What was it?" he asked, standing up at once, nearly tripping over himself in an effort to help her. As for the other two members of the office, they were too uncomfortable seeing Padmé again that they said nothing. She recognized them as the two of the teachers who had been saying such callous things about Anakin when he was still confined to the breath suit. *This has worked out just perfectly*, she mused.

"It was a holo," she told the man. She turned to look at Anakin. "Would you help me find it?" she asked him.

"Of course," he replied, not realizing what she was doing. He entered the room and immediately sensed the tension of the occupants within.

"Oh, this is my husband," Padmé said, putting her hand on Anakin's arm. "You may remember him as Darth Vader," she added, looking directly at the two teachers who were doing their best to slither out the door.

"Yes, yes I heard about your surgery, Lord Vader," the councilor said. "Remarkable what modern medicine can do."

"Indeed it is," Anakin agreed, looking on top of the tall cabinet. "Is this what you're looking for?" he asked his wife, picking up a framed holo that had been knocked down.

"Yes, that's it," Padmé replied, taking it from him and brushing off the dust. "I'm so relieved to find it," she added, looking back at the new councilor.

"I'm happy you were able to do so," he replied with a smile.

"Well I guess we can go home now," Padmé said, looking back at Anakin. "If you'll excuse us," she said, as they walked past the two ashen faced teachers, who simply watched with mouths agape as they walked away.

"Wow," said the female teacher once they were out of earshot. "I never would have dreamed Darth Vader was that hot under his mask."

The man looked at her. "You think she remembered all those things we said..."

"Of course she does," the woman snapped. "Why else would she bring him in here to show him off? Not that I blame her," she admitted. "He's worth showing off."

The man simply rolled his eyes in response and left the room.

"Did I miss something?" Anakin asked his wife as they walked down the corridor with the twins.

Padmé smiled. "I'll tell you later," she said, looking straight ahead. "I see someone you may be interested in talking to," she told him.

Anakin looked over to where her eyes were directed and smirked when he saw Len Wagar engaged in a lively conversation with a young, female teacher.

"Pouring on the charm again, I see," Anakin commented.

"That's a student teacher," Luke told them. "She just started today. Mr. Wagar's been hanging around the class where she works all day."

"He's *such* a loser," Leia sighed with a rueful shake of her head.

Anakin and Padmé exchanged an amused look.

Wagar looked up as he noticed Padmé and the twins approaching, and smiled. And then his eyes turned to the tall, handsome stranger at Padmé's side, and the smile faded. His fragile masculine ego felt tremendously threatened looking at the man who appeared to be the same age as he was, and whose very presence fairly oozed masculinity.

"Hi Mr. Wagar!" Leia said with a smile.

"Hey there short stuff," Wagar replied, glancing nervously at Anakin. "Lady Vader, Luke," he added.

"How are you, Len?" Padmé asked, amused by the man's obvious confusion.

"Good, good," he replied, looking back at Anakin. "Who's your friend?" he asked, assuming a protective stance.

"He's not my friend," Padmé said. "He's..."

"Look, it's none of my beeswax," Wagar interjected, "but if I were you, dude, I'd watch my step. Lord Vader is crazy jealous, if you know what I mean."

"Is he now?" Anakin asked, enjoying the moment immensely.

“Hell yes,” Wagar replied. “He sees you anywhere near his wife and kids and he’ll probably rip your arms off.”

Luke and Leia were unable to hold back their giggles at this point, which only added to Wagar’s state of bewilderment.

“Len, this *is* Lord Vader,” Padmé spoke up finally. “He had reconstructive surgery recently.”

Wagar’s eyes widened in shock as he looked back at Anakin. “Really?? Are you kidding me?”

“No, she’s not kidding,” Anakin spoke up. “It’s me, Wagar.”

“Whoa,” Wagar replied. ‘Hey, sir, listen,’ he began, “about what I said...”

Anakin held up a hand to stop him. “Don’t worry about it,” he said, shocking Wagar with his words. “What you said was perfectly acceptable, and certainly true,” he added with a smile.

Wagar laughed a loud, nervous laugh as the relief that he wasn’t going to have his arms ripped off spilled over. “Yeah, yeah it is, isn’t it?” he said.

Anakin looked at his wife, and she could see by his expression that his patience had reached an end where Len Wagar was concerned.

“Time for us to go, kids,” she said. “Take care, Len,” she added.

“Yeah, take it easy!” Wagar called after them as Anakin and Padmé lead the twins down the corridor and towards the exit.

“Now *that* was fun,” Anakin said as they reached the doors.

Padmé laughed in response.

Chapter 93

Ninety-three

Coruscant

The family was welcomed home warmly by Obi-Wan a short time later. The twins were bursting to tell him all about their visit at the school, and how their father had made Mr. Wagar look like a fool yet again. Obi-Wan had become accustomed to Luke and Leia's unique way of speaking, of completing one another's sentences effortlessly and fluently.

"Sounds like a rather interesting visit," Obi-Wan remarked with a smile, looking up at Anakin. "You're looking well," he said.

"I feel fantastic," Anakin told him. "Lots of rest does wonders for a man."

"Not to mention some beautiful Naboo scenery and sunshine," Padmé added. "You're almost as tanned now as you were when you were a padawan."

Anakin nodded. "Yes, it was great to go swimming and get some sun," he said, looking at Obi-Wan. "I understand you did some swimming too," he added, a hint of a smile on his face.

Obi-Wan sensed Anakin's barely concealed mirth, and felt sure he knew the cause of it. "Yes I did," he replied. He ran a hand over his beard thoughtfully. "What was the count? Eight was it?"

"Nine," Anakin replied, knowing exactly what he was talking about.

"What count?" Padmé asked as they walked into the living room to sit down while the twins ran off to their rooms.

"We used to keep a count on how many times we'd saved each other's life," Obi-Wan explained.

"I saved his hide nine times," Anakin explained.

"Yes you did," Obi-Wan agreed. "And that is all negated now."

Anakin frowned. "Negated?? Why? What are you talking about?" And then he smiled. "You would be talking about the...swimming trunks, would you?" he asked.

Obi-Wan shook his head. "You have no respect for my dignity, Anakin," he complained. "You never have."

Anakin laughed at this comment, unable to deny it. "Lime green were they?" he asked.

"Yes," Obi-Wan replied. "With purple starbursts. Unfortunately I...misplaced them otherwise I'd show them to you."

"Misplaced them?" Anakin laughed. "Somehow I doubt that."

Padmé watched the two men as they bantered, and it warmed her heart to see it.

"I think I'm going to go see about dinner," she said, leaving the two men alone. "Try to behave," she added, looking at Anakin.

"So I trust you and Padmé enjoyed your stay on Bespin," Obi-Wan said.

Anakin nodded. "Yes, very much," he replied. "Thanks again for staying with the twins."

"Don't mention it," Obi-Wan replied. "It was a pleasure." He hesitated for a moment, trying to decide if he ought to tell Anakin about Luke's nightmare. But before he could, the twins came into the room, each holding something behind their back.

"What have you got there?" Anakin asked as the twins came to stand in front of Obi-Wan and Anakin.

"Two surprises," Leia told her father. "One for each of you," she added, looking at Obi-Wan.

"Oh?" Obi-Wan asked, sensing the children's excitement, but unable to discern what they were hiding behind their backs.

"First of all, look who came home with us," Leia said, showing her father the small bird they had rescued on Naboo. She looked considerably larger and healthier than the last time Anakin had seen her, and he smiled.

"Looks like you two have taken good care of this little thing," Anakin remarked, holding out his hand to the bird. She hopped into his large hand at once. "Did you give her a name?" he asked.

"Spike."

"Sunshine."

Each twin looked at the other as they heard the other.

"Spike is *not* her name," Leia declared.

"Neither is Sunshine," Luke retorted. "That's a stupid name, it's so *girly*," he said, making a face.

"She's a girl bird," Leia pointed out with a scowl. "Remember?"

"So?" Luke replied.

"Enough, enough," Anakin intervened. "Clearly we'll have to come up with an alternative both of you can live with."

The twins glared at each other.

"Tell us about your surprise, Luke," Obi-Wan suggested.

"Oh, yeah," Luke said, momentarily forgetting the quarrel with Leia. 'Look what I found,' he said, producing the infamous swimming trunks with a triumphant smile. "You almost forgot them!"

Obi-Wan's initial reaction was one of horror; but he quickly mastered it in order to spare the boy's feelings. "*There* they are," he said with a smile. "Thank you, Luke," he said, seeing

Anakin struggling not to laugh from the corner of his eye. “This is a wonderful surprise.”

“You’re welcome,” Luke replied with a smile.

“Do you two have homework?” Anakin asked.

“Yes,” the twins replied simultaneously.

“Okay then, get to it,” Anakin said, anxious for them to leave. No sooner had they done so then he burst into laughter.

“You should have seen the look on your face!” he said between fits of laughter. “Oh Force that was funny!”

Obi-Wan shook his head, unable to smile at Anakin’s mirth. “Yes, go ahead, laugh at my expense,” he sighed. “I’m certainly used to it by now.”

This only made Anakin laugh harder, and it wasn’t long before he had tears in his eyes.

Han Solo walked into the room at this point, the scene before him shocking him to a halt.

Anakin noticed the young man standing in the doorway and motioned for him to come in as he wiped the tears of laughter from his eyes.

“Sorry to...intrude, sir,” Han began, “but there are a couple of things I need to tell you.”

Since the death of Jon Kassel, it had befallen Han to take over his administrative duties. Han didn’t exactly like doing it, but realized he was stuck with the job until such time as a replacement could be found: item number one on his list of business to discuss with Anakin.

“Have a seat, Solo,” Anakin said.

“Uh... thanks sir,” Han said, the change in Anakin unnerving him somewhat. “I just wanted to bring you up to speed on a few things,” he continued.

“Yes of course,” Anakin said. “Proceed.”

“Well sir first off I’d like to respectfully suggest that you find an administrative assistant,” Han began. “I’ve been carrying the ball since Jon died, but it’s not my area of expertise, if you know what I mean.”

Anakin nodded. “Yes, that’s not your job,” he agreed. ‘Find one for me,’ he said. “As soon as possible.”

“Oh... okay then,” Han said, annoyed that he hadn’t anticipated being asked to do the legwork. ‘Secondly, there’s a realtor who’s been leaving messages here for days,’ he added. “Said there’s a place you *have* to see,” he added.

“Good,” Anakin replied. “Make an appointment for us to see it tonight.”

“Ok,” Han continued. “I’ll do that right away.”

“Anything else?” Anakin asked.

“Well... yeah,” Han said, not quite sure how to phrase his next concern. ‘Obi-Wan here told me that you’ve changed your name,’ he said. “That you’re using your original name, Skywalker, again.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Anakin replied. “Which reminds me— find the name of the lawyer who looked after the twins’ name change and get her over here as soon as possible.”

“Will do,” Han replied.

“Was there something else?” Anakin asked, sensing that there was.

“This is going to sound stupid,” Han admitted. “But none of the men know how to address you, sir. You’re not Lord Vader anymore — what do you want to be called?”

Anakin had no quick reply for this, and looked at Obi-Wan. “I don’t know,” he said finally. “Emperor Skywalker? Sounds....odd.”

Obi-Wan nodded in agreement. “It does,” he said, “but you are the emperor, after all. What other title could you assume without everyone losing sight of that fact?”

“You’re right,” Anakin replied. ‘And speaking of that, perhaps it’s time I had a press conference,’ he added. “Lay to rest all the ridiculous rumors that have been flying about since the death of Palpatine.”

“Good idea, sir,” Han replied. “Do you want me to arrange that too?” he asked.

“Yes,” Anakin replied, “but not right away. I’ll let you know when.”

“Yes sir,” Han replied, standing up. “I’ll contact that realtor and set up a time for you and Milady to see the house,” he said.

“Good,” Anakin replied. “That’s all for now, Solo.”

Han bowed his head respectfully and then left the room to follow his orders.

“A press conference is a good idea,” Obi-Wan said. “But how much will you tell them? Surely many will recognize you as being the Hero with No Fear. How will you address the issue of your past?”

Anakin thought about this for a moment. For so long he had been denying his past, ignoring it and burying it beneath the darkness and pain he’d felt since the day he’d first believed Padmé was dead. But now things were different. Now he wanted to embrace who he truly was, to cast off the shadows of darkness that had kept him subservient to the monster, Palpatine, for ten years.

“I’ll think of something,” he said at last. “I always do.”

Obi-Wan shook his head. “Nothing like leaving things to the last minute,” he quipped.

Anakin smiled. “Say, did I mention that there’s a pool in the lower level?” he said. ‘You’ll be able to go swimming now that your trunks have miraculously appeared.’ Obi-Wan laughed. “Yes, and I can’t tell you how delighted I am about that.”

Anakin laughed too.

“Are you still teasing poor Obi-Wan?” Padmé asked as she walked into the room.

“No, not at all,” Anakin responded, standing up and giving her a kiss on the cheek.

“Now why don’t I believe that?” Padmé replied with a smile.

“Because you know him very, very well,” Obi-Wan replied, standing up as well.

Padmé laughed. “Come on, dinner is ready,” she said, taking Anakin’s hand.

“Great,” Anakin replied. “And then after dinner I have a surprise for you,” he told her.

“Another surprise?” she asked. “Ani, you’re too much.”

Anakin smiled, and brought her hand up to kiss it. “And you wouldn’t want me any other way,” he teased.

Chapter 94

Ninety-four

“So what’s the big surprise, Daddy?” Leia asked as they sat down to dinner.

“There’s a house I’ve been looking into,” Anakin told her. “My realtor has contacted me to let me know that it’s available to purchase, and we’re going to see it tonight.”

“Why do we need a new house?” Luke asked. “This one is awesome, Dad.”

Anakin looked at his son, knowing that coming from the poverty of Tatooine, his current home must seem like a palace. “We’re the royal family now, Luke,” Anakin explained. “We need to live in something more fitting of royalty. Besides, this place is going to be too small once your little brothers and sisters and start coming along,” he added with a smile, looking at Padmé.

“We’re having little brothers and sisters??” Leia asked excitedly.

“Not in the near future, but eventually,” Padmé spoke up.

“This place has too many bad memories too,” Anakin added. ‘Every time I pass by what used to be my quarters I think of being in that hyperbaric chamber,’ he explained. “And every time I walk down the hallway I think about Jon Kassel and how he was killed there.”

Padmé nodded. “I do too,” she said. “And how that monster took me away.”

“A new house represents a new start for us as a family,” Anakin said.

Luke and Leia nodded, seeing their father’s point of view.

“Is it big?” Luke asked. ‘Bigger than this place?’ Anakin smiled. “You could say so, yes,” he replied.

“I can’t wait to see it,” Leia declared. “Will Luke and I still be close to each other? Our rooms I mean?”

“I’m sure we can make sure of that,” Padmé spoke up. “Why don’t we wait and see what the place looks like first.”

“Yes, good idea,” Anakin said.

After dinner the family headed out for an estate several kilometers away from the city. The countryside seemed so oddly out of place on planet predominated by massive skyscrapers; but it was a welcome sight to all.

“How far until we get there?” Leia asked, looking out the window.

“I think we’ve been on the property for a few minutes already,” Anakin told her.

“Whoa, the place must be huge,” Luke said.

Anakin nodded. "About nine hundred hectares," he said.

Padmé looked at him in shock. "Nine hundred hectares?" she asked.

"That's why the realtor told me," Anakin replied.

"I'm not sure we need something that large," she said.

Anakin looked at her. "How big was the estate you lived in when you were queen of Naboo?" he asked.

"Not as big as that," she replied.

Anakin lifted an eyebrow in response, not sure if he believed her. Padmé noted his response, but said nothing.

A short time later they pulled up to a security gate, where they were met by another speeder. The driver of the speeder got out of his vehicle at once and approached them, waving at them with an eager smile.

"Your realtor, right?" Padmé asked Anakin.

"Yes," he replied. "What gave him away? The boot licking smile?"

"That plus the tacky jacket he's wearing," Padmé replied. Luke and Leia giggled at their mother's comment.

"Hello! Hello!" the man said as Anakin opened the window. "So happy you could make it! I'll open the security gate and then we can have a look inside, okay?"

"Yes, proceed," Anakin said.

The man peered into the back seat of the speeder. "Are you two excited??" he asked, giving them the double thumbs up. Luke and Leia merely replied with smiles of barely concealed mirth.

"What a duffus," Luke said quietly to his twin as the man returned to his speeder.

Leia giggled. "Maybe he's related to Mr. Wagar," she suggested.

Anakin heard them and smiled, the same thought having crossed his mind.

"Whoa," Luke said softly as the gate opened up and the house could finally be seen in the distance. Set far back from the gate for privacy, the enormous stone house stood at the end of a tree lined roadway. A huge front yard, featuring a round, marble fountain in its centre, was spread out before the house.

"We're gonna live *there*??" Leia asked as she watched in awe as they drew closer to the enormous building.

"Perhaps," Anakin said. "We'll have to see if we like it," he added.

He pulled the speeder in front of the building behind the realtors and got out, followed by Padmé and the twins. For a moment they simply stared up at the house, which was far beyond what any of them had been anticipating. The realtor could see how impressed they were and smiled.

“The house is the largest on Coruscant,” he began. ‘Sixteen thousand square meters, with two-hundred and fifty rooms. There are almost one thousand hectares of surrounding property, almost one hundred of which are professionally designed and maintained gardens,’ he continued as they entered into the house. “There is an indoor pool and outdoor pool, a library...” he continued on, but no one was listening to him at this point, for the entrance way had utterly mesmerized them.

The ceiling was vaulted, and featured large beams of dark wood which set in stunning contrast to the white finish below. An enormous fireplace was situated at one end of room, while a grand, spiral staircase drew ones eye to the center of the room and upward. The floors were of marble, something rarely used any more because of its rarity and costliness. It seemed however that in the making of this house, no cost had been spared.

“Would you like the full tour?” the realtor asked.

Anakin looked at Padmé, to get a sense of what she felt. She nodded, and he could see that she was as excited as he was.

“Yes we would,” Anakin replied. “Show the way.”

It took over two hours to see the entire house, and it was nearly dark outside by the time they had finished the tour.

“Well, I’m sure you’ll want to discuss...” the realtor began.

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” Anakin interjected, looking at Padmé. “I think I know how my family feels.”

Padmé looked up at him, quite certain that he did.

“We all love to place,” Anakin said. “Don’t we?” he asked the twins.

Luke and Leia nodded enthusiastically.

“Excellent,” the realtor said, smiling at the thought of the enormous commission coming his way. “Shall we draw up the paperwork?”

Later that evening

“I can’t believe we’re going to live in that huge place,” Luke commented as they arrived back home.

“Believe it,” Anakin replied “We can take possession right away.”

“Who was the former owner?” Padmé asked. “And why are they selling such a magnificent place?”

“I don’t know,” Anakin replied. “Someone who has left Coruscant I suppose. Probably some rich industrialist,” he added.

“Rich for sure,” Luke said. “I had no idea places like that even existed. Why does anyone need a place that big?”

“No one does,” Anakin replied.

“So why are we living in a place like that?” Luke asked.

"I thought you liked the place, Luke," Padmé commented.

"I do," Luke replied. "I guess I just feel kinda weird about it too."

"Luke we're royalty now," Leia reminded him. "And we need to live in a palace. And that's a palace."

Luke shrugged. "I guess," he replied. "Wait a minute, if we're royalty, does that mean I have to wear dorky clothes and act like a snob?"

"Of course not," Anakin replied. "Why would you ask that?"

Luke looked at his sister with a sly grin. "No reason," he replied.

Leia wasn't sure, but she felt as though she'd just been insulted.

"Homework finished?" Padmé asked.

"Almost," Leia replied.

"Well get to it," Padmé said. "I'll ask Threepio to start packing."

The twins did as they were told, leaving Anakin and Padmé alone in the room.

"It will be a big adjustment for Luke," Padmé commented.

Anakin nodded in agreement. "He'll be fine," he said. "He found this place to be enormous when he first arrived, but in no time he was perfectly comfortable."

"I suppose," she replied.

Anakin frowned. "I thought you wanted this," he said.

"I do," she replied. "I'm just concerned that Luke will be overwhelmed. Leia has lived in a palace, she's used to that sort of opulence. But Luke... until a year ago he was a farm boy."

Anakin nodded. "And now he's a prince," he pointed out. "Believe me, he'll be fine," he said. The computer screen sounded, indicating an incoming message. Anakin stood up and sat down at the desk to check the message.

"What is it?" Padmé asked.

Anakin scanned over the message briefly before responding. "It's from Tagge," he said. "Can you believe it? The Death Star is finally done. And it only took eleven years," he said, looking up at her with a smile. But Padmé was not smiling.

"And now that it's complete, what's next?" she asked.

Anakin was reluctant to enter into this discussion, for he knew how Padmé felt on this particular topic.

"What's next?" he said at last, "I haven't decided yet."

Padmé nodded, having heard this before. She was beginning to suspect he said this merely as a way to placate her. "Don't you think it's time you did decide?" she asked. "It's finished now. You're the emperor. You need to make a decision."

Anakin sighed, and ran a hand through his hair in frustration. “Angel, I don’t want to get into this again,” he said. “I don’t want to argue.”

Padme frowned. “You still plan to keep that atrocity, don’t you?” she said, standing up to face him. “That’s why you don’t want to discuss this. There is no discussion.”

“Padmé you’re being difficult,” he said, standing up.

“You once told me that you couldn’t do this without me,” she reminded him. “And that you needed my help. Is it that you want my help when my opinion meshes with yours, and when it doesn’t you don’t want it?”

“No, of course not!” he replied in frustration. “This is something you don’t know a lot about, Padme: I do. You don’t have the same experience as I do; you don’t understand how the Empire works like I do.”

“I think I know exactly how the Empire works,” she replied.

“Do you?” he asked, starting to grow annoyed with her attitude. “You were in hiding for ten years. How much can you possibly know?”

Padmé narrowed her eyes, her anger reaching it zenith. “I know enough to remember what its creator did to you,” she retorted, “to us and our family. I know plenty,” she told him and then left the room, too angry to remain any longer.

Anakin watched her go, unsure if he ought to go after her or remain where he was. He tightened his fists in frustration, hating the tension between he and his wife, but not knowing how to alleviate it.

“Sir?”

Anakin looked up to see Han standing in the doorway. “What is it, Solo?”

“Lara Varsin, the lawyer you wanted to talk to,” Han told him.

“What about her?”

“She’s here.”

“Now?”

“Yes sir. Now, in your office.”

Anakin cursed under his breath. “Very well,” he said. “Let Padme know.”

“Right away, sir.”

Anakin walked around from behind the desk and out of the room.

Lara Varsin had heard rumors that Darth Vader had received medical treatments that enabled him to live without his mask. She’d heard that his wife now lived with him. But she really had no idea what to expect as she sat waiting in the large office where she’d first met the imposing Sith Lord nearly a year ago.

“Miss Varsin?”

She started in her chair at the unexpected sound of a deep, masculine voice and turned quickly in her chair to face the doorway whence the voice had come.

“Yes?” she said, checking out the fantastically handsome man standing in the doorway.

“Thank you for coming so quickly,” Anakin said, coming over to the desk. “I didn’t realize you’d be able to make it so soon.”

The woman was confused for a moment, and then it dawned on her: this is Lord Vader. “Lord Vader?” she said, her shock evident in her face.

Anakin nodded. “You’re surprised,” he observed. “I thought it was common knowledge now that I’d had surgery.”

“Yes, yes it is,” she replied, her eyes not leaving him as he took his seat. “I just didn’t expect...” she began, and then stopped, though he could easily read the rest of her thought: *that you’d be so damn hot!*

“I’ve assumed my birth name once more,” he told her, deciding to ignore the appraising way she was looking at him. “And I want to change my children’s name as well from Vader to Skywalker.”

“Of course,” Lara replied, making a quick note on her datapad. “Is there anything else I can do for you?” she asked, giving him a smile.

“No, that’s it,” he replied.

“Very well,” she said. She hesitated for a moment, and he sensed that there was something she wanted to ask him. ‘You must have been very young when the twins were born,’ she commented. “I mean... you’re still so young. I had no idea!”

“I don’t think the issue of his age is relevant, do you?”

Lara turned to the doorway once more where a beautiful woman had just entered the room.

“No, I don’t suppose it is,” Lara replied, her face turning red.

“Miss Varsin, my wife,” Anakin said, looking at Padme and trying to determine if she was still angry with him.

“Milady,” the woman said, “it’s an honor to meet you.”

Padmé merely nodded in response, and then looked at Anakin for an explanation.

“Miss Varsin is the lawyer who I engaged to change the twins’ surname,” he told her. “She’s back to change it once again.”

“I see,” Padmé replied. “I won’t keep you from conducting your business,” she said.

“Our business is complete,” Anakin said. “Miss Varsin was just leaving.”

“Yes, yes I was,” the woman stammered, sensing the tension between the two. ‘Good night to you both,’ she said. “I’ll file this right away.”

“Thank you,” Anakin replied. “Good night.”

An awkward silence fell over Anakin and Padmé once the lawyer had left the room.

"I didn't realize your lawyer was a woman," Padmé said at last as Anakin sat on the edge of his desk.

"Is that a problem?" he asked, doing his best not to smile.

Padmé shrugged. "I suppose not," she replied. "I guess I'm just stereotyping when I imagined your lawyer was a stuffy old man."

Anakin smiled. "Are you... disappointed?" he asked.

Padmé folded her arms over her chest. "Are you making fun of me?" she asked.

"No," he replied. 'Maybe teasing you just a little,' he told her. "But I'd never make fun of you."

"Well that's a relief," she replied.

Anakin nodded, sensing that she was still quite upset with him. "I'm sorry if I upset you earlier," he said. "I hate this tension between us."

"So do I," she replied. "But you know the reason for it, Ani."

"I know," he replied. 'I only hope that you know me well enough to know that I would never do anything to hurt you, not ever again,' he told her earnestly. "I made you a promise that I would spend the rest of my life making up for the past, and I meant it."

"And I believe you, Anakin," she replied.

"So trust me now," he told her, walking over to her. "Trust that I will do what is best, what I feel will best protect you and our family. That's all I ask," he concluded, taking her face in his hands.

Padme looked up at his face, seeing the sincerity in his eyes. "I trust you, Anakin," she assured him. "I always have."

Anakin smiled. "Does that mean you're not angry with me anymore?" he asked hopefully.

Padmé couldn't help but smile. "I suppose not," she replied.

"Does that mean we can go to bed now?" he asked, his smile growing.

Padmé couldn't hold back her laughter at this point. "Are you tired?" she asked.

Anakin shook his head. "Not a bit," he said, pulling her close to kiss her.

Chapter 95

Ninety-five

The hallways seemed unending as Luke made his way through the huge residence. In the distance he could hear the sounds of many footsteps, as though a great deal of people were rapidly approaching. This only made Luke more anxious to find her, and he began to run through the enormous, empty hallways. In his mind he could see her; her beautiful face streaked with tears, her hand resting on her rounded abdomen. The boy felt certain that it was his father she mourned, that it was for him that she wept in seemingly inconsolable lamentation. Luke wanted to help, he was desperate to help, but didn't know how....didn't even know how to find her...

Luke awoke suddenly and sat up in bed, his heart racing. The dreams were becoming more frequent, and even more intense in the emotions they were starting up within him. He tried to take comfort in the explanation that Obi-Wan had given him, that the nightmares were merely insecurity manifesting itself. But Luke didn't feel insecure; if anything, he felt more secure now than he ever had in the previous nearly eleven years of his life. He had both his parents, a twin sister, a wonderful home, friends... not to mention every material want his heart could desire. Where did insecurity fit into that picture? No, Luke was starting to feel that there was more to his dreams than that, and he hated to think of what that might be.

Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, Luke looked at the chrono beside his bed, and noted that it was just past 300 hours. Knowing that he'd sleep no more, Luke got out of bed, activating the light overhead as he did so. He slipped his robe and slippers on, and left his room, deciding to do something to take his mind off of his nightmare.

Elsewhere in the house

Anakin was enjoying a deep and delicious sleep, spooned up behind his wife, which was his favorite way to sleep. Since his physical restoration, Anakin and Padmé had spent every night this way. Both had remarked on how impossible it was now to sleep without the other, had both wondered how they'd spent ten years apart from one another's bed.

Anakin's sleep was rudely interrupted by the sound of his comlink which sat on the table beside the bed. With a groan of frustration he rolled away from Padmé and reached his hand out to bring the device to his hand.

"What?" he growled, not making any attempt to hide his irritation.

"Sorry to disturb you sir," the voice of an anonymous clone said, "but I thought you ought to know that your son has accessed the lower level."

Anakin frowned. "What? Are you sure?" he asked.

"Yes sir."

Anakin sighed, and sat up at once. "I'll be right there," he said. "Don't alarm him."

"I won't, sir," the clone replied. "He's in the workshop."

"Understood," Anakin said. He closed off the transmission and stood up, activating the lights as he did so.

The lights woke Padmé up and she turned to look at him sleepily. "Ani, what are you doing?" she asked with a yawn.

"Just getting a drink of water," he said, slipping on his sleep pants. "Go back to sleep," he added.

Padmé wasn't sure why he was getting dressed to go into the fresher that adjoined the room, but she was too sleepy to ask, and simply rolled over and went back to sleep.

In the workshop

Luke had almost finished applying a thin layer of veneer to the left wing of the model he'd made when he sensed his father's presence nearby. He continued what he was doing, focusing on keeping his hand steady.

Anakin entered the room and watched his son for a moment, certain that the boy knew he was there. He waited until Luke finished what he was doing before speaking.

"Looks good," Anakin said as he walked over to the work bench.

Luke looked up at him. "Thanks," he said. "I had to do it again, the first time it wasn't even."

Anakin nodded. "And you needed to fix it at three in the morning?"

Luke frowned, his eyes lowering to the model again. "I couldn't sleep," he explained.

Anakin sat down, sensing his son's agitation. "Why not?" he asked.

Luke looked up at his father, and Anakin could see the uneasiness in the boy's eyes. "I had a bad dream," he said.

Anakin nodded, doing his best to hide his alarm. "What about?" he asked simply.

Luke sighed. "I'm not even sure," he said. "But it's always the same," he added. "I'm in a place I've never been in, and..."

"Wait a minute," Anakin interjected. "This isn't the first time you've had a bad dream?"

Luke shook his head. "No, I've had a few of them," he said.

Anakin frowned. "Why didn't you tell me?" he asked.

Luke shrugged. "I didn't think it was a big deal," he replied. "I told Obi-Wan when you and Mom were on Bespin. He said it was just me worrying about my family."

"But you don't think so," Anakin said.

"No, I mean... I don't know, Dad," he replied. "I'm confused. I don't want the dreams to mean anything, but something inside me tells me they do."

“Why don’t you tell me about them?” Anakin suggested, trying to hide his own alarm from the boy.

“Well, it’s mostly about Mom,” Luke told him. Anakin’s alarm became impossible to hide.

“What about her?” he asked.

“She’s sad,” Luke told his father. ‘Very sad. She’s crying, and I have a feeling that it’s because she misses you.’ Luke stopped at this point. “I don’t want anything to happen to you, Dad,” he said, his blue eyes shrouding over with tears. “I can’t imagine living without you now!”

“Luke,” Anakin said, drawing his son into his embrace. ‘Nothing is going to happen to me, I promise you.’

“Then why do I keep dreaming this same thing?” Luke asked with a sniff.

“I think that you’re having visions of the past, Luke,” Anakin told him.

Luke frowned. “I am?”

Anakin nodded. “Through the Force it is possible to see the future and the past,” he explained. “I think what you’re envisioning is what your mother went through after my fall.”

Luke nodded. “She was having a baby in the dream I had tonight,” he told Anakin.

“You and Leia,” Anakin said. “It was a very difficult time before you two were born. Your mother spent a lot of time alone, worried about me. I’m sure there were many times she cried just as you saw her in your dream.”

Luke sniffed again, and wiped his nose on the sleeve of his pajamas. “That makes sense,” he said, starting to feel better. “I just wish I wouldn’t have them any more. I hate seeing Mom sad, Dad. It breaks my heart.”

Anakin smiled. “You love your mother very much,” he said. “It’s natural that you would feel that way.”

“You’ve had dreams that came true, haven’t you?” Luke asked.

“Yes, unfortunately I have,” Anakin replied. “I foresaw the death of my mother in dreams.”

“That must have been terrible,” Luke said.

Anakin nodded, the thought of his mother’s death still tremendously painful to him. “It was,” he replied. “Particularly since I could have saved her if only I’d reached her in time.”

“What do you mean?” Luke asked.

Anakin sighed, hating to relive that terrible chapter in his life, but sensing how much Luke needed to connect with him. And so he told him the story, starting with the first time he’d dreamed of Shmi’s impending death right up to the moment she’d died in his arms. Both father and son were in tears by the end of Anakin’s sad narrative, but both felt closer to the other somehow.

“Come on,” Anakin said, standing up. “You have school tomorrow. Time to get back to bed.”

“Okay Dad,” Luke replied, standing up too. “And Dad?”

“Yes Luke?”

“Thanks. You’re the best Dad in the universe,” Luke said, wrapping his arms around Anakin’s waist.

Anakin returned his son’s embrace, too moved to say anything in response.

“I’ll miss this house, Dad,” Luke said as they walked to the lift a few moments later. “But the new one is gonna be awesome. Did you see the workshop??”

Anakin nodded. “I think that’s what sold me,” he told Luke. “We could build a pod racer in that room it’s so huge.”

Luke grinned. “That would be *so* cool,” he replied.

“It would,” Anakin agreed. ‘You know, I was thinking about all that land,’ Anakin said a few minutes later as he and Luke stepped into the lift. “And was thinking we ought to build a race track.”

Luke looked up at his father with wide eyes. “Are you serious??” he asked.

Anakin nodded. “One thousand hectares— who needs that much land? Think of it, Luke, we could race swoop bikes, or pod racers...” he stopped as he realized that there was no way Padmé would ever allow Luke to race.

“What’s the matter?” Luke asked, seeing the smile fade from his father’s face.

“There’s no way you mother will go for that,” Anakin said. “And I guess she’d be right. I remember how much my mother hated it when I raced.”

Luke nodded, realizing his father was right. “Well... maybe we can’t make a race track,” he said. “But we can make a...bike trail. You know, a place where we can *ride* bikes.”

Anakin rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I like the way you’re thinking, Luke,” he said. “It would be a shame to let all that land just sit there, after all,” he added.

“Yeah, it sure would,” Luke agreed. They both started laughing at the same time, just as the lift doors opened up to reveal Padmé standing in the hallway waiting for them.

“What are you two doing?” she asked. “It’s the middle of the night!”

Anakin and Luke looked at one another sheepishly, and then laughed again, much more quietly this time as Padmé got the distinct feeling that she was missing something.

“Luke was having trouble sleeping,” Anakin explained as he and Luke stepped out of the lift. “I was just helping him find his way back to bed.”

Padmé nodded. “I see,” she said, looking at Luke. “Are you okay, sweetie?” she asked, stroking his tousled blond locks gently.

"I am now, Mom," Luke told her with a smile. "Goodnight," he said, giving her a tight hug.

"Goodnight Luke," Padmé replied, kissing the top of his head. "Sleep well."

Luke ran off down the hall to his room as Anakin took Padmé by the hand.

"What was that all about?" she asked.

"The boy's been having bad dreams," he told her. "He just needed some reassurance."

Padmé frowned. "Bad dreams? What about?"

"I think he's having visions of the past," Anakin told her as they entered their bedroom. "He's been dreaming about seeing you crying and alone."

"Poor Luke," she said. "Why would he dream about that?"

Anakin shrugged as they got back into bed. "Perhaps he's just feeling protective of you after what happened with Palpatine," he suggested. "Perhaps he simply loves his mother a great deal," he added with a smile.

Padmé smiled. "He's a very special boy," she said as she snuggled into his embrace. "He reminds me so much of you when I first met you."

"Yes, I see it too," he replied, kissing the top of her head.

"So what were you two laughing about?" she asked.

"Hmm?" he asked, pretending not to hear her as he lay on his back with her in the crook of his arm.

Padmé looked up at him. "You heard me," she said. "What were you laughing about? Or is it a secret?"

Anakin smiled, his eyes closed. "I'd never keep a secret from you, my love," he said.

Padmé narrowed her eyes. "Why don't I believe you?" she asked.

Anakin's smile only grew larger.

"I know one way to make you talk," she warned.

Anakin opened his eyes at once. "You wouldn't," he said.

Padmé nodded slowly. "Oh but wouldn't I," she replied.

"Ruthless," he teased.

"Stubborn," she countered, bringing her hands down under the covers to tickle his bare midriff.

Anakin tried to grab her wrists as she attacked his abdomen with a flurry of tickles, but she was too quick for him. Finally he decided to fight fire with fire and used the Force to move her hands away from him, laughing at the look on her face as he did so.

"That is so unfair," she protested.

“How is that unfair?” he asked as he grabbed her wrists finally.

“Using the Force is cheating,” she explained.

“Only in gambling,” he replied with a smile.

Padmé laughed with a shake of her head. “You are so bad,” she said. “Influencing our son with your scheming ways,” she added.

Anakin laughed. “Scheming ways? I’m scheming now, am I?” he asked.

“Always,” she said looking at him with a smile.

“How do you put up with me?” he asked.

“I have no idea,” she said.

Anakin smiled, and then laughed. “I see,” he said, pulling her close. “Goodnight, Angel,” he said.

“Goodnight Ani,” she replied, nestling into his arms. It wasn’t long before they were both asleep again, nestled in the embrace of the other’s arms.

Chapter 96

Ninety-six

Padmé awoke the next morning to the sound of her husband's snoring. She rolled over and watched him for a few moments with a smile, pleased that he was enjoying such a good sleep. For ten years he had slept so little, and she suspected that even the little sleep he'd had was full of nightmares. *And now Luke is having them*, she reflected as the smile faded from her face. *I hope Ani's right— I hope Luke is merely having visions of the past. This family has been through enough heartache to last a lifetime.*

Glancing at the chrono on the bedside table, Padmé saw that it was time to get up and start the long process of getting the twins ready for school. Deciding to let Anakin sleep in, she got out of bed and headed for the fresher to have a shower and get dressed.

Anakin woke up in an empty bed, a feeling he'd decided he most definitely did not like. He opened his eyes and saw that Padmé was already showered, dressed, and about to leave the room.

"Good morning," he said, startling her with the sound of his voice.

Padmé turned to face him. "Good morning," she replied with a smile. "I'm just going to get the kids up."

"Want some help?" he asked, hoping she'd say no.

"No, you sleep," she said, walking over to the bed. "You didn't get much last night," she reminded him, running her fingers through his tousled hair.

"Okay," he replied. "Wake me up when you get home," he said.

She smiled. "Any particular way you'd like me to do that?" she asked.

Anakin grinned. "In whatever way you wish, Milady," he replied.

Padmé laughed, and bent close to kiss him. "Very well," she said. "I'll see you later. Enjoy your sleep."

"Thanks Angel," he said.

Padmé stood up and walked to the door, stopping for a moment to look back at him and blow him a kiss before leaving.

Once the door closed behind her, Anakin rolled over onto his side, and was asleep again within minutes.

"Good morning, time to wake up now," Padmé said, entering Luke's room, knowing it would take more effort to pry him from bed than his sister.

Luke's response was to pull the covers up over his head with a groan.

“Time for school, Luke,” Padmé said, sitting on the side of his bed and pulling the blankets down.

“Do I have to go to school?” he asked. “I’m really tired.”

“I’m not surprised,” she replied. She considered what to do for a moment, realizing that as much as she hated the thought of him missing school, the boy must undoubtedly be tired. ‘Okay, how does this sound,’ she said. “Why don’t I let you sleep in and you can go to school in the afternoon? That way you won’t miss the whole day.”

Luke smiled. “Sounds great,” he said. “Thanks Mom,” he added.

“You’re welcome,” she replied, planting a kiss on Luke’s forehead. “Have a good sleep.”

“Okay,” he replied with a yawn. By the time Padmé had woken Leia up in the adjoining room, Luke was already asleep again.

A little later...

Padmé and Leia arrived at the school a few minutes before the bell.

“Are you coming in, Mom?” Leia asked as she got out of the speeder.

“Yes, I need to talk to the school secretary,” Padmé told her. “Your father is changing you and Luke’s surname, and I need to let them know.”

“Three last names in one year,” Leia said with a smile. “How crazy is that?”

Padmé smiled. “It’s been an interesting year, hasn’t it? You and Luke will soon be celebrating a whole year with your father.”

“And before that our birthday,” Leia added with a smile. “The first one we’ll all be together.”

Padmé nodded. “We’ll have to make it an extra-special occasion.”

Leaving Leia outside to play with her friends, Padmé proceeded into the school and to the office.

“Good morning,” she said to the secretary.

“Good morning, Lady Vader,” the secretary responded with a smile. “How can I help you?”

“I’m here to let you know that Luke and Leia’s records will need to be updated,” Padmé told her. ‘We’re moving house this week,’ she added. “Here’s the address,” she said, handing the woman a data card.

“Thank you,” the secretary replied. “How exciting!”

Padmé smiled. “Yes, we’re all very happy about the move,” she said. “Also, my husband has decided to start using his birth name again, and so we’ll be legally changing Luke and Leia’s surnames as well.”

“Oh?” the secretary asked in surprise.

“Yes,” Padmé replied. “Effective immediately they are to be known as Luke and Leia Skywalker, not Vader.”

The secretary was shocked to hear the name, for she recognized it. However, being the professional that she was, she hid it well. “I will enter that into their permanent records at once,” she told Padmé. “Thank you for informing me.”

“Not at all,” Padmé replied. “Is Miss Zadane in her classroom?”

“I can check for you,” the secretary replied. ‘Just a moment, please,’ she added, turning in her chair. After a moment she turned back. “Yes she is,” she reported. “I’ve told her to expect you.”

“Thank you,” Padmé replied.

“You’re most welcome.”

Padmé left the office and headed to Miss Zadane’s classroom, hoping she wouldn’t run into Len Wagar along the way. She didn’t, to her relief, and was met in the doorway of the classroom by Luke and Leia’s teacher.

“Good morning,” Miss Zadane said with a smile. “How are you?”

“Very well, thanks,” Padmé replied. “I hope you don’t mind me popping in like this,” she added.

“Not at all,” the teacher replied. “Come right in.”

Padmé followed her into the empty classroom, which seemed oddly quiet without the children present.

“I just wanted to let you know that Luke will be late today,” Padmé told the teacher. “He had a rough night, and I let him sleep in.”

Miss Zadane frowned. “I’m sorry to hear it,” she replied. “Is he ill?”

“No, no he had a bad dream,” Padmé replied, “and it took him a couple of hours to calm down.”

“I see,” Miss Zadane replied. “Well I hope he’s all right.”

“He’s fine,” Padmé replied. “Just tired.”

The teacher nodded. “Good,” she replied. “I’ll make sure he gets caught up when he gets in.”

“Thank you,” Padmé replied. Just then the bell rang, heralding the imminent arrival of the students. ‘I should get going now,’ she said. “Thank you for your time.”

“You’re most welcome,” Miss Zadane replied. “Have a nice day.”

Padmé left the classroom and had walked only a few steps when she was met by Leia and her friends. To her surprise, Leia ran to her and gave her a hug.

“Bye Mom,” she said, looking up at Padmé with a smile.

Padmé smiled back. “I’ll see you later, sweetie,” she said, kissing Leia on the forehead. “Have a great day.”

“Thanks Mom,” Leia replied. “You too!”

Back at the Skywalker home

Anakin was enjoying a deep sleep when he heard someone moving around in the room. It sounded as though they were opening and closing drawers and closet doors, and doing so in a rather loud fashion. He opened one eye and looked over at the closet, where See Threepio was busily removing clothing and packing it in a large trunk.

“Threepio, what the hell are you doing?” Anakin grumbled.

“Oh, good morning Master Ani,” the droid replied cheerfully. “I trust you had a good sleep.”

“I was having a good sleep until you came in here and started banging around,” Anakin growled. “Why are you in here?”

“Lady Padmé asked me to pack,” Threepio replied. “The movers will be here at 1300 hours.”

Anakin groaned, having forgotten that rather pertinent fact. “Great,” he grumbled as he got out of bed. He stumbled towards the fresher, cursing under his breath. Threepio paid him no heed and continued with his work.

Later on in the gymnasium...

Obi-Wan had always been a creature of habit, and had arisen at the same hour for close to fifty years now. It was getting harder to begin his day with a vigorous work out, but this had been how he started his day for many years, so he pushed himself to keep up with his regimen.

Since his reconstructive surgery Anakin had begun his day in the same manner, resuming the physical workouts that had been a big part of his life before Mustafar. He was not at all surprised to find Obi-Wan already working up a good sweat when he arrived in the gymnasium.

“Hope you’re not over doing it, old man,” Anakin quipped with a smile as he pulled off his tunic.

Obi-Wan smiled. “Don’t worry about me,” he assured Anakin. “Besides, I’m not the only one who’s a little...older now.”

Anakin smiled. “Yes, true,” he replied. “But I’ll always be younger than you,” he pointed out.

“Yes, very true,” Obi-Wan agreed. “Pity you’ve gained no wisdom in your old age,” he added.

Anakin laughed as he started his workout.

Upstairs

“Milady, can I talk to you?”

Padmé, who was in Leia’s room packing, turned to see Han in the doorway.

“Of course,” she said. “What is it, Han?”

“I have lined up some candidates for the emperor’s administrative assistant,” Han told her. “I’ve arranged interviews for them.”

Padmé smiled. “You’re very anxious to be replaced, aren’t you?” she asked.

Han laughed. “Is it that obvious?” he asked.

“Yes it is,” Padmé replied.

Han laughed again and shrugged. “Well, I guess I’m just not cut out to be the administrative assistant type,” he admitted.

“You’re doing a fine job, Han,” Padmé pointed out. “But I can see your point. When did you arrange for them to be interviewed?”

“This morning,” he informed her. He looked at his wrist chrono. “They’ll be here in less than an hour,” he added.

“Very well,” she said. “I suppose Threepio will have to finish up in here,” she added, looking around at the neatly folded clothes that were lying on top of Leia’s bed.

“I’ll make sure he gets right on it,” Han told her.

Padmé nodded, suspecting that Han very much enjoyed bossing around the pernickety droid, and then left the room to go prepare for the interviews that Anakin had asked her to conduct. She was only too happy to do so, for she was anxious to ensure that he hire the perfect person for the position.

In the gymnasium

Obi-Wan had concluded his work out, and stood with a towel draped around his shoulders watching Anakin. He was still amazed at the medical miracle that had restored Anakin’s health; it was almost as though Mustafar had never happened. *But it did happen*, he reflected somberly; *and I’m not certain I will ever forgive myself for what I did on that day...*

“The twins tell me the new house is rather large,” Obi-Wan said as Anakin sat down for a short breather.

Anakin nodded. “An understatement,” he said. “But I want a big place.”

“Why is that?” Obi-Wan asked, sitting down across from him.

“To have plenty of room for family,” Anakin replied with a smile.

Obi-Wan nodded. “I take it you plan on adding to the Skywalker clan,” he remarked.

“Yes,” Anakin replied. ‘But I meant you in that family as well, Obi-Wan,’ he said. “I hope you’ll come and live with us.”

Obi-Wan was touched by Anakin’s invitation and smiled. “I’m honored that you feel that way, Anakin,” he said.

“So you’ll come and live with us?” Anakin asked.

“Under one condition,” Obi-Wan said.

Anakin was surprised by this, but nodded nonetheless. “And that is?”

“That you put those blasted swim trunks down the incinerator as I’d planned to do on Naboo,” Obi-Wan replied.

Anakin laughed. “You’ll be disappointing the twins if they disappear suddenly,” he pointed out.

“They were lost in the move,” Obi-Wan replied with a smile.

Anakin laughed again. “Very clever,” he replied. “Very well, I’ll do it personally. Deal?” he asked, holding out his hand to Obi-Wan.

“Deal,” Obi-Wan replied. He looked around the gymnasium briefly. “You don’t have any practice lightsabers down here by any chance, do you?” he asked.

“Yes I do,” Anakin asked, standing up once more to resume his work out. “Why?”

“It’s been a long time since I’ve had an opportunity to practice,” Obi-Wan replied with a smile. “I thought perhaps we could get some in now.”

Anakin said nothing in reply, as a feeling of uneasiness filled him. “I don’t think so,” he replied shortly and walked over to a weight machine.

Obi-Wan watched him, sensing his great uneasiness. “Anakin?” he said.

Anakin stopped in his tracks, but didn’t turn around. “I can’t fight you, Obi-Wan,” he said. “I... I won’t fight you. Not after what happened on Mustafar. I... I just can’t.”

Obi-Wan nodded, feeling awkward for even having suggested it. He walked over to his friend to face him. “I’m sorry,” he said. “It was a foolish suggestion.”

Anakin looked at him. “No it wasn’t,” he replied. “We used to spar all the time. And perhaps, one day, we’ll be able to again. But not yet... I’m just not ready for that.”

“I understand,” Obi-Wan replied. ‘You know, I think perhaps it would be timely for you to replace the lightsaber you’ve been using for the past ten years,’ he said. “I have your old one, you know.”

Anakin frowned. “The one I slew younglings with?” he asked bitterly. “I don’t want it back. Destroy it.”

Obi-Wan nodded, starting to feel as though he was doing more harm than good. “Perhaps you ought to build a new one then,” he said. “And teach the younglings how to as well. I think they’re ready to learn, don’t you? It would be good for all of you.”

Anakin nodded, some of the feeling of uneasiness starting to lessen as he considered this. “Yes, I think so too,” he replied. ‘The workshop in the new house is immense,’ he told Obi-Wan. “We can start as soon as we can assemble the materials.”

“Good,” Obi-Wan replied. ‘New beginnings,’ he mused. “They’re very exciting, don’t you think?”

Anakin nodded, a small smile making its way into the corners of his mouth. “Yes they are,” he agreed. “Very exciting.”

Upstairs

“I’ve spent ten years in the Imperial navy; five of those were spent acting as a personal assistant to Moff Billings...”

Padmé nodded occasionally, doing her best to appear interested. The truth was, she wasn’t. Each of the first two candidates had done little more than name drop in an attempt to impress Padmé with their connections. But she wasn’t impressed, and was looking for more in an assistant for Anakin than simply another government drone. There was no doubt that he would be a demanding employer, and the person she selected would have to be patient, creative and have a thick hide. So far neither of the men she’d interviewed had demonstrated any creativity, and although they were certainly highly qualified, there seemed to be something missing from their personality that made Padmé feel they would not be up to the challenge of working for Emperor Skywalker.

The final candidate was late by nearly five minutes, which did nothing to impress Padmé. Finally a clone showed her in, and Padmé was somewhat surprised to see that it was a woman rather than a man.

“I’m so terribly sorry,” the woman said as she came over to Padmé. ‘I was all set to leave when my daughter had a major crisis.’ She rolled her eyes. “Kids,” she said.

Padmé smiled. *This is the one*, she thought. “Please, have a seat,” she said, “Miss...”

“Heckmann,” the woman replied. “Riema Heckmann. Thank you.”

The woman sat down as Padmé looked at the CV that the woman had handed to her. It was nothing short of impressive.

“You’re not in the military,” Padmé said, looking up at her.

“No,” Riema replied. “I wasn’t aware that was a qualification, your majesty.”

“It isn’t,” Padmé replied.

“I did attend the Imperial Academy,” she pointed out, “as you can see right there.”

“So what made you leave the service?” Padmé asked.

“My family,” Riema replied. ‘I have three children,’ she added. “They came along a little sooner than we’d anticipated,” she continued with a smile.

Padmé smiled too. “They do have a way of doing that,” she agreed. “How old are they? Your children?”

“My eldest is fifteen,” she explained. “He’s studying at the Academy right now. I have an eleven year old daughter and a six year old daughter.”

Padmé nodded in understanding. “And their father? Is he involved in the military?”

“He was,” Riema replied. “He was killed in an accident a year or so back at the drive yards.”

“I’m so sorry,” Padmé replied. “You certainly have your hands full, then,” she said, starting to have doubts.

The woman nodded, and then realized how she must be presenting herself. “I know I must seem like a person who has no business applying for a position such as this,” she said. “But I promise you, I can do a good job. There’s nothing like being a mother to master the art of multi-tasking.”

“Yes, that’s very true,” Padmé agreed. ‘But this position is very demanding,’ she pointed out. “You’d be expected to take up residence in the palace so you could be available to the emperor at any time.”

“I realize that,” Riema replied. “And I’m fully prepared to do that. My children are good children, your majesty; you wouldn’t even know they were around.”

Padmé smiled. She liked the woman, and had a good feeling about her. But was that enough given Riema’s situation?

At this point, Anakin entered the room. He had not expected to see a visitor in the office, and hadn’t showered after his work out. Padmé looked up at him, relieved to see him.

“Anakin this is Riema Heckmann,” Padmé said. “She’s one of the candidates for the position of your assistant,” she explained.

Anakin nodded as he wiped sweat from his face with the towel. He looked at the woman, who seemed rather shocked to see the emperor bare-chested and sweaty. He sensed her nervousness, which he considered natural. He also noted that there was no hint of anything improper in the way she looked at him. And that pleased him. “You have experience in this particular field of work?” he asked.

“Yes your majesty,” she replied. “I worked for Admiral Byrd,” she explained.

Anakin’s eyebrows lifted at this. “Byrd?” he asked. “I imagine he was not an easy man to work for,” he remarked.

Riema smiled, not knowing if he was testing her at this point or not. “It wouldn’t be professional of me to discuss him, sir,” she replied.

Anakin nodded, impressed by her response. “May I?” he asked his wife, holding his hand out for Riema’s CV. He scrolled down to the references, and activated the citation from the admiral. Despite the fact that Byrd was a well known task master and insufferable ass, he had given Riema an excellent reference. This spoke volumes to Anakin.

“You’ve got the job,” he said, looking at her. “If you can please that son-of-a bitch, then you must be phenomenal.”

Riema smiled again. “Thank you sir,” she replied, the relief filling her. “I appreciate your confidence in me.”

“When can you start?” Anakin asked.

“Whenever you need me to,” she promptly replied.

"I need you today," Anakin told her. "We're in the middle of a move, and things are a little bit... crazy."

"I know all about crazy, sir," Riema assured him.

"She has three children," Padmé told him.

Anakin laughed. "Then you do know craziness," he remarked. "You're going to need to get your things packed. We have plenty of room in the new place. And we have kids too; they'll love having other younglings around."

Riema nodded. "May I ask how old your children are?" she asked.

"Nearly eleven," Padmé told her. "We have a twin son and daughter."

"Lovely," Riema replied.

"Good," Anakin said. "That's settled. Go home, get packed, and report back here as soon as possible."

"Yes sir," Riema replied. "I'll don't have much to pack, so it won't take long."

"We can send some clones to assist you," Padmé offered.

"That would be very helpful, thank you," Riema replied.

"Good idea," Anakin said. 'I'll get someone up here right away,' he added. "Welcome aboard, Riema," he said, holding out a hand to her.

"Thank you sir," she replied with a smile. "Thank you so much. This job means more to me than I can say."

Chapter 97

Ninety-seven

"Luke, come on, I told you that you could sleep in for part of the day, not the entire day," Padmé said as she sat on the edge of his bed.

Luke yawned with a stretch. "Okay," he sighed.

"Come on," she said again, standing up. "Up you get. The movers will be here early this afternoon, and I want you at school, not here underfoot."

Luke gave her what he hoped was a hurt look. "Mom, I wouldn't be underfoot," he complained. "I'd help!"

Padmé smiled. "Nice try," she said. "Now up you get before I get Threepio in here to help you get dressed."

"Okay, okay," Luke said, moving more quickly. "I'm going."

The rest of the day was a busy one at the residence of the royal family, as movers came in and took the place by storm. They moved quickly and efficiently, packing up the crates and boxes and loading them into a large transport vehicle. Threepio did his best to appear like he was helping, but in reality the movers were sorely tempted to lock him in a closet.

"I think we ought to go over to the house to coordinate things from that end," Padmé suggested as the movers came close to finished their task.

"Good idea," Anakin replied. "Han, you stay here to direct things," he said.

"What about the twins?" Han asked. "It's almost time to pick them up."

"I can do that," Obi-Wan spoke up.

"Good," Padmé said. "What about Riema?"

"I sent her on ahead to the house," Anakin told her. "She needed to get her kids from school too."

"Who's Riema?" Obi-Wan asked.

"My new assistant," Anakin informed him.

Obi-Wan nodded in understanding.

"Okay then," Anakin said. "We'll meet you two over at the house later on."

Anakin and Padmé left the house for the last time and made their way over to their new home. They were both excited about the move, for this was the first home that they'd chosen together.

"You know we're going to need to buy a lot of furniture," Padmé pointed out to him.

“Yes I know,” he replied. “I’ll leave that to you.”

“I wonder...” she said, and then said no more as she pondered what she was considering.

“What are you wondering?” Anakin asked her.

“Well... what if we hired someone?” she asked. “You know, an interior designer. That house is far too large for me to do myself.”

Anakin nodded. “Sure, if that’s what you want,” he replied. “Just so long as I’m not asked to look at drapes, I’m fine,” he added with a smile.

Padmé laughed. “You have my word,” she replied.

Controlled chaos was how one could describe the state of affairs as the movers brought in furniture and crates and were directed by the lady of the manor. Into this mix the twins arrived from school, the excitement of the move making them more hyper than normal.

Riema’s children, on the other hand, were far more subdued amidst all the hullabaloo than Luke and Leia were, and did their best to stay out of the way.

Finally, by the time night had begun to fall, the movers left, and things started to settle down. It was at this point that introductions were made.

“Luke and Leia, this is Riema Heckmann, your father’s new assistant,” Padmé said as they sat in one of the large sitting rooms on the main floor. “And these must be your daughters,” Padmé said, giving the two young girls a smile.

Riema nodded. “This is Jacqueline,” she said, putting an arm around the younger girl, “and this is Rachelle,” she continued, putting her other arm around the older of the two.

“Rachelle is eleven, aren’t you?” Padmé asked.

Rachelle nodded shyly.

“Cool, we’ll be eleven on our birthday this month,” Leia said with a smile.

“Do you like to swim?” Luke asked the girls.

This time Jacqueline nodded.

“Can we go swimming after dinner?” Luke asked his parents. “Just wait ’til you see the awesome pool we have,” he told the girls with a smile.

“Cool,” Rachelle said with a smile.

The three parents exchanged a smile, getting the feeling that their children were going to get on just fine.

“Excuse me,” Threepio said as he toddled into their midst. “But dinner is ready.”

“Yes! I’m *starving*!” Luke declared jumping to his feet.

“Luke,” Anakin said simply, giving his son a look as the boy was about to run out of the room.

Luke stopped in his tracks, a sheepish look on his face. “Sorry,” he said.

Anakin looked down at Padmé with a shake of his head. “Let’s all go, shall we?” he said, standing up.

The dining room was enormous, and so Padmé had instructed the serving droids to serve dinner in the less formal breakfast room. The table was still large enough to seat everyone, with several chairs left over.

It wasn’t long before the four children started getting better acquainted, and it warmed Riema’s heart to see her children so happy and so welcome in the grand estate.

“Padmé, look,” Anakin said, nodding toward the end of the table where Obi-Wan was engaged in conversation with Riema. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

Padmé smiled. “Obi-Wan? I don’t think so,” she said. “He’s a confirmed bachelor, remember?”

“I don’t know,” Anakin replied, looking at his friend. “He seems rather taken with her, don’t you think?”

“I think someone has on over active imagination,” she replied.

Anakin smiled in response. “We’ll see,” he replied.

After dinner the children were anxious to go swimming, and so the adults accompanied them outside to the pool. It was a warm evening, and the water was well heated. It took all of the children’s patience to wait the mandatory thirty minutes before diving in.

“I see your girls like swimming as much as Luke and Leia,” Padmé remarked as they sat by the pool.

Riema nodded. “They’ve always enjoyed the water,” she said, watching them with a smile. ‘I haven’t seen them enjoying themselves like this in a long time,’ she added, looking back at Padmé. “Thank you for making us all feel so welcome.”

“We don’t want our children to let all this change them,” Padmé said. “They may be the children of the emperor, but we want them to have normal lives as much as possible. Having your children here with help them keep all this in perspective.”

“Luke and Leia are remarkable younglings,” Obi-Wan said at this point. “I don’t think you need to worry about them, Padmé.”

“I hope not,” Padmé replied. “But you have to admit, that this is all rather... ostentatious.”

“It is,” Anakin agreed. “But so long as the kids know that money isn’t as important as people, then we won’t have any problems.”

“An excellent point, Anakin,” Obi-Wan pointed out. “Seems you have gained some wisdom after all,” he quipped with a smile.

Anakin laughed. “Amazed, Obi-Wan?”

“Yes,” Obi-Wan replied. “Pleasantly so.”

Riema was a little surprised by the familiarity between the two men, and looked at Padmé as though for an explanation.

"Don't mind those two," Padmé told her. "They've been squabbling like that for twenty years now."

Riema looked back at Obi-Wan, finally realizing who he was. "You're... you're Kenobi and Skywalker," she said. "From the Clone Wars."

"No, Skywalker and Kenobi," Anakin corrected her with a smile.

"You two were the greatest heroes of the war," she continued in awe. "I... I had no idea you were... I mean that you'd survived all this time."

"I...managed," Obi-Wan replied, not sure how much he ought to divulge about his past.

"Have you seen the gardens, Riema?" Padmé asked, anxious to change the subject. "They're quite spectacular."

"No, I haven't had a chance yet," she replied.

"Why don't you go have a look at them now," Anakin suggested. "I'm sure Obi-Wan would be happy to accompany you," he added, looking at Obi-Wan with a smile.

Obi-Wan gave Anakin a rather alarmed look, but didn't want to appear ungentlemanly. "Of course I would," he said, standing up. "Shall we?" he asked Riema.

Riema was a little surprised by Anakin's suggestion, but decided it would be best not to refuse the offer. "Yes, let's," she agreed, standing up to join him.

Padmé waited for them to leave before turning to Anakin. "That was subtle," she remarked.

Anakin smiled. "I know what I'm doing, trust me," he told her.

"Poor Obi-Wan," she said. "Did you see the look on his face?"

"I imagine it was similar to the look he gave the kids when they found those trunks of his in the shop," he quipped.

Padmé shook her head. "You're terrible," she said, unable to keep from smiling.

Anakin reached over and took her hand. "I know," he told her as he kissed her hand.

Later that night

"Finally in bed?" Padmé asked.

"Yes," Anakin replied. "I didn't think they'd ever settle down," he told her.

Padmé smiled set her brush down and turned around to look at him. "It's been an exciting day for them, for all of us."

Anakin nodded as he sat on the edge of the bed. "They seem to like their new rooms," he told her.

"I'm just glad they're close by," Padmé said, standing up. "This place is so huge I was afraid they'd be on another floor."

"I'd never let that happen, Angel," he assured her. "You know we can't trust those two on their own," he added with a smile.

Padmé laughed. "Yes, that's certainly true," she replied as she came over to where he was sitting. "So you think there's a romance in the offing?" she asked him as he took her hand.

"Always," he said, pulling her onto his lap.

"I didn't mean us," she laughed. "I meant Obi-Wan and Riema."

"Oh," he replied, kissing her on the cheek. 'Them,' he said, kissing her again. "Yes, I do," he concluded, moving down to her neck.

"Did Han tell you that he'd scheduled the press conference for tomorrow?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Are you ready for it?"

"Yes."

"Sure?"

Anakin pulled back and looked at her. "Very sure," he assured her. "I've been pondering this for a long time. I think I'm just going to be totally honest, Angel. Tell them everything. I'm tired of hiding behind lies and secrets."

Padmé nodded. "Including telling them that you killed Palpatine?" she asked.

"Yes, including that," he replied. "The way I see it, I did everyone a favor by ridding the galaxy of that pestilence."

"You did," she agreed.

"And with Tarkin gone, and the governors and moffs removed from their positions, there will be no one to challenge my authority," he told her with a smile. "I can finally run things the way I see fit, just as we'd always planned to."

Padmé frowned as he continued to nuzzle her neck. "*We'd* planned to?" she said. "When did we plan to rule the galaxy, Anakin? That's always been your plan, not mine."

Anakin stopped what he was doing and pulled back again to look at her. "I know you wanted nothing to do with my desire to rule the galaxy ten years ago," he told her. "And I completely understand why you felt that way."

"Do you?" she asked.

"Yes of course," he replied. 'I was a monster ten years ago,' he continued, running a hand lightly down her arm. "Consumed by darkness and anger. I'm not that man anymore, Padmé. I hope you realize that."

"Of course I realize that," she said, taking his face in her hands. "The darkness is gone, I know that."

"Then trust that I know what's best for the galaxy," he told her. "I can't do this alone, Padmé. I need you and your political expertise, not to mention your support. It's all pretty

meaningless without you at my side.”

Padmé smiled. “I told you once before that I trust you, Ani,” she said.

“Then don’t worry,” he told her. “Everything is going to be good, I promise.”

Padmé said nothing more as he pulled her close to him again, hoping against hope that he was right.

The next morning

“What time are all the reporters coming over?” Luke asked his parents the next morning at breakfast.

“Han told them to be here at 0900,” Anakin replied. “I didn’t want them here when you and Leia are still home.”

“Why not?” Leia asked.

“Because I don’t want the media anywhere near the two of you, that’s why,” Anakin replied. “You know that. I’ve always felt that way.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” Luke replied. “I guess it’s kinda hard to think of you as being the same guy as you were all that time ago, Dad.”

“I suppose so,” Anakin agreed. ‘I am, and I’m not,’ he continued. “If that makes any sense.”

“It does,” Padmé replied. She looked at her wrist chrono. ‘Come on you two,’ she said. “It’s a longer trip to school now, so we have to leave earlier.”

Luke and Leia curbed their urge to protest, and simply downed the rest of their juice and got up from the table.

“Good morning your majesties,” Riema said as she entered the room.

“Good morning,” Padmé replied. “Where are the girls?” she asked.

“Oh I just got back from taking them to school,” Riema replied. “It’s quite a distance from here, so I had to leave pretty early to get them there on time.”

“Why don’t you enroll them at Veslack?” Anakin suggested. “That way they can ride with Luke and Leia.”

Riema seemed surprised by his suggestion, and a look of embarrassment came over her face. “I’m afraid their tuition is a little steep for me, sir,” she replied. “Sending my son to the Academy is about all I can manage right now.”

“I see,” Anakin replied, feeling badly that he’d brought it up.

“We’ll work out something, I’m sure,” Padmé said.

“Yes, I’m sure we will,” Anakin agreed. He looked at his wrist chrono. ‘I guess it’s almost time for the circus to begin,’ he quipped. “I should go get ready.”

“I’ll have them shown up to the media room when they arrive, sir,” Riema spoke up. “I’ve made sure that the guards are doubled everywhere.”

“Good,” Anakin replied, impressed by her efficiency. “Notify us when you’re ready,” he told her as he and Padmé stood up.

“I will,” she replied. “Good luck, sir,” she added with a smile.

Anakin nodded, and then left the room with Padmé.

Upstairs

“Well I suppose I’d better look the part,” Anakin said, standing and looking in his closet. He had no idea what to wear, however, and turned to his wife for help. “Any suggestions?” he asked.

Padmé smiled as she lay the gown she’d selected on the bed. “Let’s see,” she said, stepping into his closet.

Anakin looked her over, admiring her as she stood there in her undergarments. “What time is this thing supposed to start?” he asked, wrapping his arms around her from behind and planting a kiss on her shoulder.

Padmé laughed. “Soon,” she said. “So don’t even go there.”

“You’re no fun,” he mumbled, releasing her.

Padmé shook her head in disbelief as she looked through his clothing. “How about this?” she said, pulling out a formal cloak. “You always look so good in black,” she told him.

“Good thing,” he said. “I don’t like to wear much else,” he told her with a smile.

“Yes I know,” she replied. “Come on, let’s get dressed,” she said.

Elsewhere in the house

The media room was filling up rapidly, as the clones kept a strict watch on who was admitted into the house. Each member of the media who arrived was searched thoroughly and before being allowed inside and no one was left alone for a moment, as each group of reporters was escorted upstairs by armed guards.

Riema watched closely as the room filled up, checking ID as each person walked in the door and checking it against the list on her datapad. Finally, when the list was complete, she signaled the clones downstairs not to allow anyone else in, and then signaled Anakin that they were ready for him. She then walked to the front of the room and up onto the dais. The room started to quiet down as she approached the podium.

“Ladies and gentlemen, if you’d take your seats, we’ll begin shortly,” she announced. The reporters took their seats and soon all talking ceased as a feeling of expectation fell over the crowd. After a few moments, the secondary entrance to the room opened, and the emperor and empress appeared.

Holo-cameras flashed and whirled as Anakin and Padmé stepped over to the podium, and they simply stood and allowed the reporters to take holos of them for a few moments. But finally, once he’d had enough, Anakin put up his hand to stop them.

“I’ve asked you here today to put to rest the rumors that have been going around since the death of the Emperor,” Anakin began, “and to answer the questions that I’m sure are being

asked everywhere in the Empire. I would ask, however, that you hold any questions until I have finished speaking, and then you will have an opportunity to ask any that have been left unanswered.” He stopped for a moment and looked at Padmé, who stood at his side, ready to support him.

“There aren’t many people in the galaxy who knew the late emperor as I did,” Anakin continued. “I knew him since I was a boy, and thought of him as a friend and looked upon him as a mentor most of my life. But he was nothing of the kind; he was a user, a monster. There were no assassins, and I was not injured defending Palpatine’s life. I was injured taking his life, for it was me who killed him.”

There was an immediate reaction among the reporters, and Anakin waited a moment for them to become quiet again.

“I had good reasons for killing him,” Anakin continued. “For the past ten years he delighted in my pain, both physical and psychological. It was he who found me near death having suffered grievous injuries on the planet Mustafar, and it was his surgeon droids who turned me into the cyborg that you knew as Darth Vader. Even though the medical technology existed to fix the injuries I’d suffered, he decided to make me into a half human monster. I endured his treatment, his torture for ten years, and then recently my life changed irrevocably when my wife, who I had long believed dead, returned to my life. Palpatine, however, could not allow this happiness in my life and, upon learning that my wife was pregnant, abducted her with the plan of taking our child from us.”

By this point the crowd of reporters fell silent, horrified shock rendering them speechless. Anakin pressed onward, sensing their shock.

“I killed Palpatine for his attack upon my family,” Anakin continued, ‘as any man would have. Ironically, I am his only heir, for he had no family of his own. I am therefore fully entitled to assume the rule of the Empire; however I will not rule as Palpatine did. My plan is to bring peace and order to the galaxy, and, with the help of my wife,’ he continued, turning to look at Padmé, “to eventually restore democracy to the galaxy.”

Padmé, who stood by his side, took his hand at this point. Anakin looked down at her with a smile, and brought up to his mouth to kiss it.

“I will entertain a few questions now,” Anakin announced, and at once the room erupted as each reporter vied for his attention.

“Your majesty, will the Imperial Senate now assume more power now that you have removed the regional governors from their posts?”

Anakin nodded. “Yes, that is my plan,” he replied. “Next question.”

“Sire, what are your plans for Senator Organa? Will he be released?”

Anakin frowned. “Organa is a traitor to the Empire,” he stated. “And a known rebel sympathizer. That is all I have to say.”

“Your majesty, the Empire has been working on a super weapon for ten years now,” one reporter asked. “Could you tell us more about the Death Star?”

“The Death Star has recently been completed,” Anakin replied, “and represents the state of the art technology in both weaponry and propulsion. It is vital tool in my plans to restore peace to the galaxy.”

“Is it true that the Death Star has the ability to destroy an entire planet?”

“Yes, its weapons array is unlike anything ever devised before,” Anakin told them.

“Your majesty, will you use the Death Star to bring about an end to the Rebellion?”

Anakin said nothing for a moment, as he sensed Padmé’s tension level elevate at this question.

“It will serve as a deterrent for any systems that feel...tempted to join in the traitorous uprising,” he said at last.

Padmé looked up at him, fighting not to let her dismay show.

“Your majesty...”

“That is all the questions I will answer,” Anakin interrupted, sensing how upset Padmé was. He motioned to the clones to open the doors, signaling the end of the session. As they reporters filed out slowly, he and Padmé exited through the rear entrance where they had entered the room earlier.

Padmé said nothing as they walked down the corridor towards the lift, but she didn’t need to say anything: her entire body spoke of how upset she was.

“Talk to me, Angel,” Anakin finally said as they stepped into the lift.

Padmé leaned back against the wall of the lift, avoiding his gaze. “What do you want me to say?” she asked.

“Tell me what you’re feeling,” he said, although he knew exactly how she felt.

Padmé looked up at him. “Do I really need to tell you?” she asked. “I think you must have a pretty good idea how I feel.”

Anakin nodded. “You’re still not happy about the Death Star,” he replied.

“I thought you told me you had no intention of using that abomination,” she responded. “It sounds to me like you have every intention of using it.”

“I didn’t say that,” he countered as the lift arrived at the third floor of the house.

“You said it was a...how did you say it? A vital tool in your plans,” she retorted. “That sounds to me like you intend on using it.”

“I told you that I will not use the weapons,” he reminded her. “Using it as a deterrent is totally different.”

“It’s not as different as you would like to think, Anakin,” she replied, following him into their bedroom. “It’s still using terror to rule the galaxy, and that is no different than what Palpatine did.”

Anakin frowned as he turned to her. "How else do you deal with terrorists?" he asked hotly. "What would you have me do, Padmé?"

"Talk to them," she countered as the door closed behind her. "Stop the threats and listen to their concerns, give them a chance to express themselves without the threat of annihilation hanging over their heads."

"Talk to them?" he retorted. "Do you know how Riema's husband died? Did you know that he was killed when the rebel scum sabotaged a prototype at the Kuat Drive Yards?"

Padmé frowned. "How do you know that?" she asked.

"I looked into her husband's records," he replied. "It wasn't hard to find out. The point is, these people have no regard for life, and don't care who they kill in order to make their point. How do you talk to people like that?" he asked. "How do you reason with minds that are bent on destruction and violence?"

"Not by matching their violence and destruction," she countered. "Nothing is accomplished if both sides resort to the same tactics. You have a chance to rise above this, Anakin, to show the wisdom that Palpatine never had. If you truly want peace in the galaxy, then you have to rise above this. These people are desperate, you have to remember that."

"It sounds to me as though you actually have sympathy for the Rebels," Anakin stated.

Padmé folded her arms over her chest. "It's hard not to considering the oppression they've endured for ten years."

"So I suppose next you'll be telling me that I ought to let that traitor Organa free," Anakin countered angrily.

"You're putting words in my mouth," she retorted hotly. "I'm trying to support you, but if you won't listen to me and even consider what I'm saying, I don't know how you expect me to do that!"

"I am perfectly willing to consider what you're saying," Anakin replied, "but when you start talking about giving in to traitors, I..."

"When did I say that??" she cried. "You're not listening to me!"

"Of course I am!"

"If you were you wouldn't be so difficult," she countered. "You wouldn't be twisting every word I say!"

Anakin walked over to the window, his arms folded tightly over his chest. "I'm not the only one being difficult," he said, looking outside as he tried to master his frustration. "You say you'll support me, but I have to wonder how serious you are when you have such empathy for the rebels," he told her.

Padmé stared at his back, his words raising her frustration level to new heights. "I can't talk to you when you're like this," she told him quietly. "You've stopped listening, and refuse to hear what I'm saying."

“Fine,” he said, turning to her. “Then there isn’t much point to me being here, is there?” he asked as he walked towards the door.

“Where are you going?” she asked him, shocked to see him react this way.

“Out,” he said simply and then left the room, leaving Padmé angry and frustrated, and utterly helpless to stop him.

Chapter 98

Ninety-eight

Anakin gripped the steering mechanism tightly as he made his way to the *Exactor*. He had no particular reason for going there; all he knew was that he had to leave.

Captain Piett was waiting for Anakin in the hangar bay when his shuttle arrived. He had not received any orders, and was rather surprised that the emperor was coming aboard. *Did I forget something?* Piett worried. *Have I overlooked some order??*

"Welcome aboard, your majesty," Piett said as Anakin strode down the ramp of the shuttle. "This is quite a sur...." Piett began, but stopped as Anakin walked past him without saying a word. The captain stood for a moment, unsure what to do, and then decided to follow Anakin, hoping to be of some help to him.

"The press conference went very well," Piett commented.

Anakin made no reply and kept walking to the nearest lift. Piett wasn't put off, however, and followed him.

"Is there something I can do for..." Piett began as they stepped into the lift. This time he was cut off as Anakin finally spoke.

"Are you married, Piett?" Anakin asked as the lift started up.

"Uh... yes, yes I am, sir," Piett replied, totally taken off guard by the question.

"It must be difficult with you here so much," Anakin commented.

Piett nodded. "She supports my career," Piett replied. 'She always has.'
"You're a lucky man," Anakin replied, and then stepped off the lift as it arrived at the bridge. Piett stood for a moment; more confused than ever, and then followed Anakin onto the bridge.

Coruscant

Padmé did her best to keep busy for the rest of the morning by unpacking the twins' suitcases. She had plenty of droids to do the work for her, but she wanted to do it, she needed to do it. The argument she'd had with Anakin earlier had left her shaken and worried, and she needed to focus on something to keep her mind off of it.

"Ah, there you are," Obi-Wan said as he entered Luke's room where Padmé was putting away her son's clothing.

"You were looking for me?" she asked, doing her best to appear cheerful.

"Yes," Obi-Wan replied. "Both of you, actually. This house is so enormous it's easy to spend half a day looking for someone," he quipped with a smile.

"You could have asked Riema," she commented.

Obi-Wan's face reddened ever so slightly at this, but he merely smiled. "Yes, well, she was unavailable," he replied. "You and Anakin disappeared after the press conference," he said, sitting down on the edge of Luke's bed. "Were you pleased with how things went?"

Padmé frowned, unsure how to reply. "I suppose so," she said. "I think it was important that the truth be disclosed."

Obi-Wan nodded in agreement. "Where is Anakin?" he asked, starting to get a sense from her that all was not well. "We were going to see about acquiring materials to start the twins on their lightsabers."

"I don't know where he is," Padmé told him as she placed a pile of neatly folded shirts in Luke's armoire.

Obi-Wan frowned. "Is something wrong?" he asked, knowing that there was.

Padmé stood with her back to him for a moment without replying.

"Padmé?" Obi-Wan asked, coming over to stand beside her. "Tell me what's going on."

Padmé turned to him finally. "I don't know," she replied. "I wish I did, but right now... she stopped as the angst she'd been holding back all morning filled her again." He's changed, hasn't he Obi-Wan?" she asked, looking at him, pleading with him with her eyes. "Tell me the Darkness is gone from him!"

Obi-Wan became alarmed at this. "Please tell me what happened, Padmé," he said again.

"Answer me," she replied.

"I sense no trace of darkness in him, Padmé," Obi-Wan told her. "Darth Vader is dead."

Padmé nodded, relieved to hear him say so, but still not able to put the matter out of her mind. "We had an argument," she told him. "It was bad, Obi-Wan," she added.

"May I ask what it was about?" he asked.

"The Death Star," she replied, "the Rebellion. The two topics we just can't seem to see eye to eye on. He became so angry that he just left."

"Left? What do you mean he left?" Obi-Wan asked in surprise.

"Just that," Padmé replied, walking over to the opened suitcase on the bed. "He left. I don't know where he is."

"Did you try his comlink?" Obi-Wan suggested.

"No," she replied. "I don't want to talk to him until he cools off." She stopped for a moment as she smoothed out a pair of trousers. "Why is he doing this, Obi-Wan?" she asked, the hurt and confusion clear in her voice. "If the darkness is gone, why is he acting this way?"

Obi-Wan wasn't sure what to say at this point, and stroked his beard thoughtfully for a moment. Anakin had always had trouble when it came to power; he'd always wanted to run when Obi-Wan had told him to walk. And now that he had more power than anyone in the galaxy, how much more difficult would it be for him?

"Perhaps it is merely the newness of the station he has found himself in," Obi-Wan suggested.

Padmé shook her head. "I don't know," she sighed. "All I do know is that he is sounding like a tyrant, not someone who plans on restoring democracy and peace to the galaxy."

"Does he know how upset you are?" he asked.

"I'm sure he does," she replied. "Not that it matters," she added as she walked over to the closet to hang up the trousers.

Obi-Wan frowned, watching her, sensing the tremendous anxiety she was feeling. "I'm sorry Padmé," he said. "I wish I knew the right thing to say."

Padmé turned back to him. "I don't need words, Obi-Wan," she told him. "I need answers."

Obi-Wan nodded, determined to find the answers she needed.

Star Destroyer Exactor

Anakin had spent the morning doing inspections, something he'd always hated doing. He was far more severe with the men than usual, and they all wondered if Darth Vader was truly gone after all. Pielt by now had figured that the emperor was on board merely as a way to avoid whatever problems he was having at home.

Anakin had just returned to his newly refurbished quarters when his comlink sounded. Half hoping it was Padmé, half hoping it wasn't, Anakin activated the device. It was Obi-Wan.

"Where are you?" Obi-Wan asked him without preamble.

"On board the *Exactor*," Anakin replied.

"What are you doing there?" Obi-Wan asked.

Anakin frowned, sensing that there was more behind his question than mere curiosity. "I had work to do," he replied.

"I see," Obi-Wan replied. "May I join you? I'd like to talk to you about something rather urgent."

"What?"

"I'd like to talk to you in person, Anakin," Obi-Wan replied.

Anakin sighed. "Very well," he said. "I'll meet you in the hangar bay in thirty minutes."

"I'll be there."

Thirty minutes later...

Anakin watched with folded arms as the shuttle carrying Obi-Wan settled onto the hangar deck floor. He felt as though he was a padawan again as he waited for Obi-Wan, feeling certain that there was a lecture coming his way. *Padmé told him about the fight we had*, he thought with grim certainty. *And he's here to reprimand me*, he frowned.

The ramp lowered onto the floor, and Anakin watched as Obi-Wan appeared. He gave him a smile as he walked towards him, and Anakin smiled back.

“What’s on your mind?” Anakin asked as they walked out of the hangar bay together.

“You,” Obi-Wan replied.

“Me?” Anakin replied. “Why?”

“Padmé told me about the row you had earlier,” Obi-Wan told him.

Anakin frowned. “I see,” he replied. “And naturally you’re taking her side,” he said.

“I didn’t say that,” Obi-Wan replied as they stepped onto the lift. “But I am concerned, Anakin. So is she.”

“We had a disagreement,” Anakin told him. ‘It happens between married couples sometimes.’

“Yes, I understand that,” Obi-Wan replied. “However Padmé is far more upset than she ought to be over a simple disagreement. She’s worried, Anakin, worried that you still have darkness in you.”

“What?!” Anakin cried. “You can’t be serious!”

“I am, I’m afraid,” Obi-Wan responded. “Very serious. She’s very upset, Anakin. Frightened even, more frightened than I’ve seen her in a long time. I thought you ought to know.”

Coruscant

Padmé was happier than usual to see Luke and Leia return home from school that afternoon, and both twins sensed that something was bothering their mother immediately.

“I had an idea earlier,” she told them as they headed upstairs. ‘Why don’t we start making plans for your birthday party?’ she asked them. “It’s coming up soon, and I think we ought to have a huge party.”

The twins loved the idea.

“Can we invite everybody in our class?” Leia asked hopefully. “I don’t want anyone to feel left out.”

“I don’t see why not,” Padmé replied. “We certainly have enough room now for that many guests.”

“This is gonna be great!” Luke said with a smile.

Padmé smiled, starting to feel the stress drain away as she and the twins started making plans for the grand birthday celebration. And for a little while, she was able to put her troubles out of her mind.

Star Destroyer Exactor

Anakin said nothing for a moment, for Obi-Wan’s statement had shaken him deeply. *How could she think I’m still dwelling in darkness?* He thought in bewilderment.

“I told her that the darkness was gone,” he said at last.

“And I told her the same thing,” Obi-Wan replied. “But she’s not so sure. She needs reassurance, Anakin. Think of all that she has been through lately, Anakin. It wasn’t so very long ago that she was abducted by Palpatine; after that she lost her baby and very nearly lost you. She’s a strong woman, but even the strongest individual needs to feel secure. You need to give her that security, Anakin. You’re the only one who can.”

Anakin nodded, starting to feel guilty over the way he’d handled things with Padmé. “I know,” he said. ‘You’re right. And I think I know what I can do to give her that,’ he added, standing up. “There’s something I want to do for her,” he added. “Something I’ve been thinking of doing for a while now. I think perhaps today would be a good day to do it.”

Obi-Wan stood up too. “Could you use some help?” he asked.

Anakin smiled. “As a matter of fact, I could,” he replied. “Thanks. And thanks for the kick in the ass. I needed it.”

Obi-Wan smiled. “Always my pleasure, Anakin,” he quipped as they started towards the door.

Anakin laughed in response.

Chapter 99

Ninety-nine

"Where's Daddy?" Leia asked as Padmé sat down to dinner with the twins.

Padmé had done her best to hide her anxiety from her children all day, but when Anakin still had not returned by dinner time, it had become almost impossible to do so.

"I'm not sure," Padmé said. "But Riema left earlier to assist him, so I imagine he's busy with something."

Luke and Leia exchanged a look of concern, both thinking the same thing.

"Did you and Dad have a fight?" Luke asked, watching his mother closely for her reaction.

Padmé continued cutting her meat and said nothing for a moment. "That's not your concern, Luke," she said finally.

Luke frowned. "I don't like seeing you sad, Mom," he told her. "And we both know you're sad," he added, to which Leia nodded in agreement.

Padmé looked up at her children with a sigh. "I know," she replied. "And I appreciate that you care, really I do. But sometimes there are things that happen between married people that no one has any control over. This is one of those times."

Luke's frown didn't leave his face. The thought of his father making his mother this upset didn't sit well with the boy, and suddenly he remembered the dreams he'd been having. His mother was sad, and somehow his father was the reason for it.... *I won't let them come true*, Luke vowed; *no matter what, I won't let him hurt her, not again, not ever...*

"Do you think Aunt Sola and the girls would come to our party?" Leia asked, deciding it was a good idea to change the subject.

"Yes I'm sure they would," Padmé replied. "That's a wonderful idea, Leia. We ought to make a guest list and get started on the planning. Maybe tonight after dinner, since you don't have school tomorrow."

"I can't believe it's been almost a whole year since Dad found us," Leia said with a smile. "It's gone by so fast. It's strange, but I can't even imagine living with the Organas now."

Padmé nodded. "I'm sure," she replied. "I'm sure they must still miss you a great deal," she added.

"I guess so," Leia agreed. "Why don't they just adopt another baby?" she said. "There has to be babies that need a home somewhere."

Padmé smiled. "Yes, there certainly are," she replied. "I think that's a good idea, Leia. Perhaps we ought to suggest it to them. It might help them get over losing you."

"We could always give her back," Luke suggested with a smile.

The looks he received from his mother and his sister told him exactly what they thought of his suggestion.

Later that night

Padmé had decided to go to bed early, feeling fatigued after all the unpacking and excitement of the new house. She was trying not to think about the fact that Anakin was still not home, and night had fallen. But as she entered her bedroom and saw the large empty bed, the thought of sleeping in it alone caused a lump to form in her throat. *Things have been going so well*, she reminded herself; *we've been through so much... surely we can get through this too...*

Padmé changed into her nightgown and then sat down to brush her hair, which was now almost as long as it had been when she'd first returned to Coruscant. *Ani has always liked it long*, she reflected as she started brushing. It frustrated her that he was seldom far from her thoughts, and realized that it was impossible for her to purge him completely from her mind.

The door opened just as Padmé was about to climb into bed, and she found herself facing her husband.

"So you decided to come home," she said, putting up her defenses at once.

Anakin nodded, sensing that she was still very upset. "I want to show you something," he said.

"Can it wait until morning?" she said. "I was just about to go to bed."

"No it can't," he told her. 'Come with me,' he said, holding out his hand to her. "Please?"

Padmé wasn't sure what to expect, but knew that he would not take no for an answer. Knowing she didn't have the energy for another argument, she simply put on her robe and joined him.

Anakin said nothing as they walked down the corridor, unsure what he should say at this point. He knew she was very upset with him, and felt terrible for it.

"There's nothing in this wing," she told him as he lead her into the enormous and yet empty east wing of the floor.

"There is now," he told her. "You said we needed furniture, so I decided to get some."

Padmé nodded. "Great," she said, trying to muster some enthusiasm. "I thought you hated shopping, though," she put in.

"I do," he told her. "I didn't need to shop," he told her as they entered one of the enormous rooms.

Padmé looked up at him with a frown, not understanding what he was talking about, and then the lights came on and she looked around. "Oh Anakin," she breathed when she saw what it was he'd wanted to show her.

The room had been transformed into a replica of the large sitting room from their home at 500 Republica, for Anakin had spent the greater portion of the day having their belongings from the apartment packed up and transported to the new house.

"I wanted to do something to make up for earlier," he told her as she walked around the room, taking in every centimeter of it. "I acted like a class one jerk, and I'm sorry."

Padmé turned to him. "Thank you for doing this," she said, reaching out and taking his hands. "And for apologizing. I hate it when we argue."

"So do I," he agreed, taking her hands up to his mouth and kissing them. 'I never want to make you feel anything but completely happy, Angel,' he told her. "I guess sometimes I'm just too damn stubborn and pig-headed to realize that I'm doing the opposite."

Padmé smiled. "We both tend to be stubborn from time to time," she reminded him.

Anakin smiled. "I suppose so," he agreed. 'But that doesn't mean I can act like a jackass and hurt your feelings,' he said, taking her face in his hands. "I never want to hurt you again, Padmé," he assured her. "Never."

Padmé's eyes filled with tears at the depth of his sincerity. His eyes were full of it, the beautiful blue eyes that had always been able to melt her heart. "Ani," she said softly, "I love you so much!" she said, wrapping her arms around his waist, and burying her face against his chest.

Anakin kissed the top of her head, as he wrapped his arms around her. "I brought everything from the apartment," he told her. "All your clothes — they took up a whole room," he teased.

Padmé laughed, and looked up at him. "Really? A whole room?"

Anakin nodded. "Small room... smallish," he told her.

"I see," she said. "And what about the rest of the furniture?"

"It's all here," he assured her.

"Even the bedroom furniture?" she asked, looking up at him with a smile.

Anakin nodded. "Yes," he told her. "Even the bedroom furniture." He smiled.

"Show me," she said, looking up at him with a familiar look in her eyes.

Anakin smiled and took her by the hand. "Come with me," he said.

They left the room and walked down the corridor to the room where the movers had set up the bedroom furniture, just as it had been in the apartment on 500 Republica. Waves of memories struck Padmé as she looked around, memories of nights spent alone, worrying if she'd ever see Anakin again; nights spent in the secure, comforting embrace of her husband; and nights of passion, when it seemed as though they could never get enough of each other.

Anakin stood behind her, and wrapped his arms around her. "Brings back memories, doesn't it?" he asked, as though he had read her mind.

Padmé nodded. "Yes," she replied. "Lots of memories. Good memories."

Anakin kissed her shoulder. "Yes, very good memories," he said, grazing his lips up the side of her neck.

"Do you remember being woken up this way?" he asked, nuzzling on her ear.

Padmé smiled. “I do,” she replied. “Many times. You were always very creative in the ways you woke me up,” she told him.

Anakin laughed. “I seem to recall one occasion when you woke me up in a rather creative manner,” he told her. “Remember?”

“I remember,” she smiled. “You seemed to enjoy that very much as I recall,” she told him.

“Force yes,” he told her. ‘You always did know how to drive me wild.’ Anakin took her hand to lead her over to the bed, and then brought his hands up to frame her face, as he kissed her softly. “I love you,” he told her. “So much I can’t breathe at the thought of ever losing you again. I’m sorry we fought, Angel. I’m sorry I was such a jerk.”

Padmé smiled and brought her hands up to run them into his hair. “You don’t need to keep apologizing, Ani,” she told him. “And you’re never going to lose me, Anakin. We belong together. I can’t imagine how I lived ten years without you.”

“Neither can I,” he replied. ‘You’re a part of me, Padmé,’ he told her, stroking her face softly. “The best part. You always were.”

Padmé felt the tears fill her eyes at his words, their fight earlier almost unimaginable to her now. “I love you so much, Anakin Skywalker,” she said, running her hands down the sides of his face, and then pulled him down to kiss him.

Chapter 100

One hundred

Padmé was pensive at breakfast the next morning. Anakin's apology had been heartfelt, and the gesture of bringing their belongings from 500 Republica had moved her deeply. And yet... had anything been resolved? He had apologized for being a jackass, but did that mean he'd changed his opinion about the Death Star? About the Rebellion? He'd managed to deflect her attention away from the true issues at hand, by indulging in nostalgia, by seducing her completely and effectively. But the issues still remained, nonetheless.

"Good morning," Anakin said as he entered the room. He bent to give Padmé a kiss on the cheek. "Last night was incredible," he whispered into her ear.

Padmé looked up at him with a smile. "Yes it was," she agreed.

Anakin took a seat at the end of the table beside her. "Kids still sleeping?" he asked as he helped himself to some breakfast.

"Yes," she told him, sipping at her tea. "No school today."

Anakin nodded. "Right," he said.

"I told them we could finalize the plans for their birthday party," she told him. "It's coming up pretty fast."

"That's right," he said. He frowned. "I wish I could think of that day without remembering Mustafar," he told her.

"I know," she replied. 'I feel the same way. But perhaps now that we're all together we'll finally be able to do that,' she suggested. "Let's make this party the memory we think of on this day," she added.

Anakin smiled. "Great idea," he replied. "Time to make new memories," he added, putting his hand on hers.

"I couldn't agree more," she said with a smile.

Just then Obi-Wan entered the room, and smiled when he saw Anakin and Padmé holding hands. "Good morning," he said. "Looks like the two of you have patched things up," he added, taking a seat.

"Thanks to you," Anakin replied. "And that well timed kick in the pants you gave me."

"As I told you, Anakin," Obi-Wan replied. "It is always a pleasure to give you a kick in the posterior."

Padmé laughed, delighted to see the two old friends on such good terms once again. "We were just talking about the birthday party," she told Obi-Wan. 'And we decided that we needed to replace our memories of Mustafar with happier ones.'

“An excellent idea,” Obi-Wan replied. “The two of you are not alone in being haunted by that day,” he informed them, looking at Anakin.

Anakin nodded, knowing exactly what he meant. “In that case, I suggest we make this party the event of the century,” he said. “An all out, no holds barred, rip-snorter of a party.”

Padmé smiled. “I couldn’t have said it better myself,” she replied.

Luke and Leia entered the room at this point. Leia was dressed and had her hair in a long braid down her back; Luke was still in his pajamas with his thick hair all tousled from sleep.

“Morning,” Leia said with a smile as she sat beside Obi-Wan.

“Good morning, Princess,” Obi-Wan said with a smile.

“Did you sleep well?” Padmé asked.

“No, I’m too excited about the party,” Leia replied with a smile.

“How about you, Luke?” Anakin asked as Luke sat down beside his mother with a yawn.

“I slept great,” he said. “And I’d still be sleeping if little miss sunshine hadn’t woken me up,” he added, glaring at his sister.

Leia merely placed her napkin on her lap and gave him a saccharin smile, which only infuriated Luke more.

“We have a lot of planning to do today, Luke,” Padmé reminded him.

“That is unless you want Leia to have all the say in the details of your birthday party,” Anakin added, trying not to smile.

At this Luke’s eyes widened and he sat up straighter. “No way!” he declared. ‘If she has it all her way the whole party will be nothing but girly stuff,’ he added. “Gross!”

Anakin and Padmé exchanged an amused look as Luke helped himself to some breakfast.

“Well in that case, you’d better wake up boy,” Anakin said. “We plan to make this party the biggest event of the century,” he added.

“No kidding?” Luke asked.

“No kidding,” Anakin replied.

Luke smiled. “Cool,” he said, nodding approvingly.

Coruscant Detention Block

Bail Organa poked at the meal before him, an unsavory mess of meat and what appeared to be dumplings. He’d almost become accustomed to what passed for food during his incarceration, which he had begun to think would never end. It had been weeks since he’d had a visitor from anyone other than his wife and even her visits were becoming less frequent, and he suspected that she was seriously considering ending their marriage.

Bail had had a lot of time to think while he was alone, and during his long hours of pondering, he’d come to a sense of acceptance of many things. He’d come to realize that it had been wrong to take Leia from Padmé, wrong to lie to her. He knew now the pain of losing

a beloved child, and it made him see how Padmé must have felt when she'd been told that her babies had died. The fact that the twins had been reunited with their mother made sense to him now, and he felt a fair share of guilt over his part in the scheme to take them from her in the first place.

And yet, despite his acceptance of losing Leia to Padmé, Bail could not accept the fact that Darth Vader had custody of his children. As far as Bail was concerned, Vader had lost all right to the twins when he'd tried to kill their mother. How Padmé could forgive him for what he'd so nearly done to her on Mustafar boggled Bail's mind; how Obi-Wan could forgive him for slaughtering the Jedi did so as well. *You may have fooled everyone else, but you haven't fooled me, Vader*, he thought bitterly. *You may look like Anakin Skywalker, you may even call yourself that again; but you're still Darth Vader, and always will be.*

"Breakfast time's over," a guard announced as he entered the cell.

Bail handed the tray over, having eaten very little of the meal.

"Not hungry?" the guard asked, noting how much food was still left on the plate.

"It was more vile than usual," Bail told the guard. "I wouldn't feed it to an animal," he added.

The guard smirked under his mask. "I'll be sure to give your compliments to the chef," he quipped, and then turned to leave the cell once more.

Royal Residence

Anakin had done his best to be enthusiastic with each tiny detail of planning the twins' party, but after almost two hours of listening to discussion between the twins and their mother about the flavor of cake, the entertainment, the party favors... he'd had all he could take.

"I'm going into town," he told his wife as he stood up from the table.

Padmé looked up at him questioningly. "What for?" he asked.

"The senate is meeting in an hour," he told her, looking at his wrist chrono. "I want to be there for the session."

Padmé was surprised by this, but said nothing. He was the emperor, after all; it wasn't surprising that he'd want to see what was going on in the senate.

"I won't be gone long," he told Padmé as he bent to give her a kiss.

Padmé nodded, and then watched him leave, doing her best not to show her disappointment to the twins. But both Luke and Leia could sense it, and it bothered them that she was, once again, upset by the actions of their father.

"Come on," Padmé said, smiling at them and focusing her attention on the task before them. "We have a lot to do and only a few days to do it. Let's go over the guest list again, okay?"

Imperial Senate Chambers

Anakin lifted the hood of his cloak to hide his identity as he entered the senate building. He took one of the lifts upstairs, his mind hearkening back to the last time he'd been in the

building, to the night he'd chosen the Dark side and had killed Mace Windu. Anxiety filled him as he reflected on how that night destroyed his life. *If only I'd known the truth*, he thought bitterly; *if only I'd known that he'd been using me all along...*

Anakin reached the upper level of the great domed building, finding the corridors crowded with senators as they awaited the session to begin. Anakin smiled, noting the small groups of politicians standing together in groups, engaged in conversation. *This is perfect*, he thought as he made his way slowly down the corridors. He stopped now and then to listen in on the different conversation, taking note of who said what and to whom.

"I heard that she's going to leave him," he overheard one gossip monger say. "She's tired of waiting for him to get out of detention."

"Do you like it? It cost me a fortune, but I figured what the hell, it's only money, right?"

Anakin was growing tired of the petty gossip he was overhearing, and was beginning to think this was a waste of time. And then he heard something that made him stop and listen more closely.

"It's a monstrosity, a waste of money and an affront to anyone who cherishes freedom," one senator was saying. "If the new emperor truly means to restore democracy, he will destroy the damn thing and be done with it."

"Maybe the Rebel Alliance will do us all a favor and sabotage the bloody thing," another senator joked, to which the other laughed in agreement.

Just then the chime sounded, announcing the start of session, and all the senators filled into the enormous dome to take their places.

Anakin watched them, the casual remarks he'd overheard angering him. He folded his arms over his chest and deliberated for a moment. And then, after waiting for a moment, he followed the senators into the dome to continue his observations.

Royal Residence

Padmé and the twins were outside enjoying a swim when Anakin returned home. He watched them with a smile for a moment before sitting down on one of the lounge chairs beside the pool.

"How did the meeting go?" Padmé asked as she climbed out of the pool.

"It was very informative," Anakin told her, watching her towel off.

Padmé was surprised by his choice of words. "Oh? Did you address the senate? What did you discuss?"

"No, I didn't address them," he told her as she sat down, a towel wrapped around her. "I... observed."

Padmé frowned. "What does that mean, exactly?" she asked, not sure she wanted to know.

"There are a lot of troublesome factors in that senate, Padmé," he told her. "I heard a lot of things that disturbed me greatly," he added.

"That's surprising," she said.

“Not really,” he replied. “I’ve known for years that there are Rebel sympathizers in the senate. I know a way to root them out now,” he told her.

“How?”

“You’re going to help me, Padmé,” he told her. “You’re going to become involved in the Senate, and find out who the traitors are among them.”

Chapter 101

I hope you all have a very Happy Christmas and a happy and healthy new year. God bless, and thanks for reading!

One hundred and one

Obi-Wan was having a difficult time getting used to living in such an enormous house. Having been a minimalist all his life, all the finery and opulence of the royal estate was more than he could deal with on most days. Not only that, he'd already gotten lost twice, and had been too embarrassed to tell anyone.

Not again, Obi-Wan groaned inwardly as he ventured into unknown territory, lost once again. He knew that if Anakin ever caught wind of his predicament, he would never let him live it down.

Sensing the presence of another human being nearby, Obi-Wan entered what appeared to be an office.

"Can I help you, General Kenobi?"

Obi-Wan turned to see Riema standing on the other side of the office.

"Ah hello, Mrs. Heckmann," he said.

Riema walked over to him, still unable to believe the great Obi-Wan Kenobi lived under the same roof as her. "Please, call me Riema," she told him with a smile.

Obi-Wan nodded. "Very well," he replied. 'Just so long as you call me Obi-Wan,' he returned. "I haven't been a general in quite some time."

"Deal," Riema replied. "What can I do for you?" she asked.

"Well, actually... there was...nothing in particular," he began.

Riema smiled. "You're lost, aren't you?" she asked.

Obi-Wan's cheeks reddened, which only made him more attractive in her eyes. "Yes, I'm afraid so," he admitted.

"Don't worry," she assured him. "I won't tell anyone. It's happened to me about five times already."

"Five?" Obi-Wan asked. "This makes three for me," he told her with a smile.

Riema laughed. "I have to go and pick up a few things in town for the empress," she told him. "So if you come with me, I'll get you back to the main floor. You're on your own after that, I'm afraid."

"That's far better off than I am now," he told her. "Lead the way, good lady."

Elsewhere in the estate

Padmé stared at Anakin for a moment, hoping that she'd misunderstood what he'd just said.

"You... you want me to spy on the Senate?" she asked him incredulously. "Is that what I'm hearing?"

"I didn't say spy," Anakin replied. 'Just get a feel for things,' he told her. "Find out who supports me and who doesn't."

"That's spying," she retorted.

Anakin looked at her for a moment, trying not to lose his cool. "Padmé, if there are people who oppose me, I need to know about it," he told her. 'If they are my enemy, then they're yours too, as well as Luke and Leia's.' He paused for a moment to let this sink in, watching Padmé as her gaze turned to the twins. "Do you want these people to use our children as pawns?"

Padmé looked back at him. "They wouldn't dare!" she retorted.

"No?" he replied. "We're talking about ruthless, immoral people, Padmé. You said yourself that they were desperate. What makes you think they wouldn't use Luke and Leia to get what they want?"

Padmé looked back at the twins, who were happily splashing in the water, completely oblivious of the intense conversation that was taking place between their parents. Padmé could feel cold anxiety fill her at the thought of anything happening to her precious children. *Surely the Rebellion wouldn't be so coldblooded*, she thought. *Anakin hates them so much he would say anything in an effort to find them... even manipulate me this way...*

Anakin could see that she was debating what he'd said, and he could see that she wasn't sure if she ought to believe him. But he needed her to believe him; he needed her to help him rid the galaxy of the pestilence he'd been hunting for ten years. *So long as they exist the galaxy will never be safe*, he reflected with grim certainty; *why can't you see that, Padmé?*

"I... I don't feel comfortable about this," Padmé said at last. She looked at him. "I don't like being given orders, either," she added.

Anakin frowned. "It's not an order," he retorted. "It's a request. You told me you wanted to help me. This would help me, Padmé."

Padmé was silent for a moment. "You weren't happy when Obi-Wan asked you to spy on Palpatine," she reminded him. "So how is it you can ask me to do basically the same thing?"

"It's not the same thing at all," he retorted.

"No? I think it is," she replied.

Anakin looked at her for a moment. "If you don't want to help me, then just say so," he told her.

"I don't want to," she replied. 'Not this way, not this,' she added. "Find someone else to be your spy, Anakin. I won't do it."

Anakin nodded. “If that’s how you feel,” he replied, more calmly than Padmé expected. “I won’t bring the issue up again.”

“Good,” she replied as she stood up. “Time to get out of the pool, kids,” she announced. “Dinner will be ready soon.”

Luke and Leia swam to the edge of the pool, taking the longest route possible, Padmé noted, and then climbed out.

“Did you see me doing laps, Dad?” Luke asked excitedly as he took a towel from his mother.

Anakin nodded. “I did,” he replied. “You’re a pro, Luke,” he added with a smile.

Luke beamed under his father’s praise, and then followed his sister and mother into the house to get dressed.

Anakin watched them leave, taking a moment to master his frustration. And then he stood up and went inside too.

Later that evening

“And we’re gonna invite *all* our friends from school!” Leia told Obi-Wan excitedly as they sat at dinner that night.

Obi-Wan smiled. “Sounds like quite a grand affair,” he remarked. “Are all the teachers invited too?” he asked.

“No way,” Luke said. “We wouldn’t have any fun if they were at the party,” he declared.

Obi-Wan and Riema chuckled.

“I hope you girls like your teachers a little more than Luke likes his,” Obi-Wan said, looking at Jacqueline and Rachelle.

“I like most of them,” Rachelle spoke up. “But there’s one who’s a real dork.”

“Is he your physical education teacher by any chance?” Leia asked with a smile.

Rachelle nodded. “Yeah, how did you know?” she asked.

“We have the biggest duffus in the galaxy as our gym teacher,” Luke told her. “In fact, there was this one time when he *peed his pants*,” he told her with great gusto.

The two girls giggled upon hearing this, and even their mother was unable to hide a smile.

Obi-Wan looked over at Padmé and Anakin, who had been uncharacteristically quiet during the entire conversation. He could sense great tension between the two of them, and worried that they’d had another fight. *What is wrong with you, Anakin?* He thought in frustration. *Don’t you realize that you’re the luckiest man in the galaxy? You have no right to be anything but a perfect husband and father now — you can’t take anything for granted, not ever again.*

“Just wait until you meet all our classmates,” Leia told the girls. “They’re so much fun; I just know you’ll think so too.”

Rachelle smiled. "I can't wait," she said. She glanced over at her mother, who was engaged in conversation with Obi-Wan, and then leaned across the table so that Leia alone could hear what she was saying. "Any cute boys in your class?" she whispered.

Leia nodded enthusiastically. "Oh yes," she assured her.

"Cool," Rachelle replied with a smile.

Luke, who had heard the exchanged, rolled his eyes in disgust.

Later that night

Padmé sat at her dressing table, brushing through her long hair as she did every night before retiring. She and Anakin had spoken to one another very little since their heated discussion earlier by the pool. Padmé knew he was angry for her refusal to spy for him; and while it upset her that he felt this way, she was determined not to give in to him. It worried her that he was so hell bent on destroying the Rebel Alliance, and so unwilling to consider negotiations. *Obi-Wan told me that the darkness was gone... so why is he acting like Darth Vader?*

Padmé heard the door to the fresher open, and Anakin emerged, having had a shower. He was naked, but Padmé ignored him, not wanting to give a hint of interest.

"You coming to bed?" he asked as he climbed into bed.

"Yes," she replied. She continued brushing her hair without saying another word. She glanced in the mirror, wondering if he was watching her; but he wasn't, he had rolled onto his side and seemed to be falling asleep. *Good, she thought. It's better if we just both go to sleep... I don't have the energy for another fight tonight.*

Setting her brush down, Padmé stood up and walked over to the bed. She watched as Anakin's broad back rose and fell slowly as he slept, or appeared to sleep. She couldn't tell if he was truly asleep or merely pretending, and she didn't really care. She climbed into bed, and immediately rolled onto her side with her back to his. Closing her eyes, Padmé forced the anxiety deep down inside, not letting it enter her thoughts as she tried to fall asleep. It worked, and in a few minutes, she was asleep.

The stench of sulfur and the searing heat are the first thing I notice as I leave the ship. What is he doing here in this hell? I hurry down the ramp, seeing Anakin running towards me. Thank the Maker he's okay!

Padmé, I saw your ship . . .

Oh, Anakin!

It's all right, you're safe now. What are you doing out here?

I was so worried about you. Obi-Wan told me terrible things.

What things?

He said you have turned to the dark side . . . that you killed younglings.

Obi-Wan is trying to turn you against me.

He cares about us.

Us??!

He knows . . . He wants to help you. Anakin, all I want is your love.

Love won't save you, Padmé. Only my new powers can do that.

At what cost? You are a good person. Don't do this.

I won't lose you the way I lost my mother! I've become more powerful than any Jedi has ever dreamed of and I've done it for you. To protect you.

Come away with me. Help me raise our child. Leave everything else behind while we still can. Don't you see? We don't have to run away anymore. I am going to bring peace to the galaxy... I am more powerful than the Palpatine ever was... ever dreamed of being! Once we've destroyed the Rebellion, you and I can rule the galaxy. Make things the way we want them to be.

I don't believe what I'm hearing . . . You haven't heard anything I've said... You've changed... you're not the same man you were, the man who promised me he'd never hurt me again...Obi-Wan told me the darkness was gone from you, but now I have to wonder if he's right.

I don't want to hear any more about Obi-Wan... he's trying to turn you against me all over again... you can't leave me now, Padmé...you belong to me.

I don't know you anymore. Anakin! You're breaking my heart all over again. I'll never stop loving you, but you are going down a path I can't follow.

Because of Obi-Wan?

Because of what you've done . . . what you plan to do. Stop, stop now. Come back! I love you. Liar!

No!

You've betrayed me! You've been helping the Rebels all along, haven't you? That's why you wouldn't spy on the Senate! You're one of them!!

NO! Anakin. I swear... I... I can't speak... I can't breathe! His hand reaches out as his yellow eyes glare at me, squeezing the life from me effortlessly....please don't do this, Anakin! I love you! Think of our baby!! You're hurting him...

Anakin was awoken by the strong feelings of terror emanating from Padmé, and he turned to her at once. "Padmé, wake up," he said, reaching out to shake her shoulder gently. "Wake up!"

Padmé woke up with a gasp, her body trembling with terror. She turned to him, both of them forgetting to be angry with the other. "Ani?" she asked in the dark, her voice tremulous with emotion.

"I'm here, Angel," he said, moving closer to her. "You were having a nightmare," he assured her, reaching up to stroke her tousled locks.

Padmé nodded, the emotions overwhelming her. She was unable to hold back the tears, and allowed Anakin to pull her into his arms, welcoming his comforting embrace.

Chapter 102

One hundred and two

Padmé awoke early the next morning, and found herself in Anakin's arms, as she did every morning. She didn't want to awaken him; for while she'd appreciated his efforts to comfort her after her nightmare, there was still a great deal of unresolved tension between them. Climbing out of bed as carefully as she could, Padmé left the bedroom to have a shower and get dressed.

Obi-Wan looked up from his breakfast as Padmé entered the room.

"Good morning, Padmé," he said in greeting, standing up as she approached the table.

"Good morning, Obi-Wan," she replied as she sat down in the chair he'd pulled out for her. "Thank you."

"You're up early this morning," Obi-Wan remarked as he took his seat again.

"So are you," she replied.

Obi-Wan smiled, getting the distinct impression that there was a great deal on her mind. "I'm always up early," he reminded her. "Old habits die hard," he added.

Padmé nodded. "I suppose so," she replied. "I just couldn't sleep any longer I guess."

Obi-Wan nodded. "And that is because?"

Padmé said nothing for a moment as she stirred her tea. "I had a bad dream," she told him. "It was about Mustafar."

Obi-Wan lifted his eyebrows upon hearing this. "I see," he replied. "That must have been very disturbing for you."

Padmé nodded. "It was," she replied. She frowned. "Obi-Wan, Anakin asked me to do something for him, something I feel totally wrong about doing."

"May I ask what it was?" Obi-Wan asked.

She looked up at him. "He asked me to spy on the Senate," she told him. "He's convinced that there are Rebel sympathizers in their midst."

Obi-Wan frowned. "He has no right to ask you to compromise your principles that way, Padmé," he told her. "I hope you refused."

"I did," she assured him. 'And now he's upset with me.' She stopped as her emotions threatened to get the better of her. "I don't understand it, Obi-Wan," she said quietly. "You told me there was no darkness in him, and yet..."

"And yet he's acting like Darth Vader," Obi-Wan finished for her.

Padmé nodded. “This is going to sound terrible, but I almost wish he was still in the suit,” she told him. “Somehow he was kinder then, humbler... he seemed to appreciate things more than he does now.”

“That’s exactly right, Padmé,” Obi-Wan concurred. “When he was in the suit he didn’t take your presence in his life for granted, nor that of the twins. Now he does. Now he has the galaxy in the grasp of his hand, and he has let all that power change him. He’s arrogant, Padmé; and he is taking everything he has for granted.”

Padmé looked down at the empty plate in front of her, dashing an errant tear away quickly. “Yes, you’re completely right,” she said quietly. ‘I... I don’t know what to do, what to say anymore. I’m tired of arguing with him, it only seems to make things worse.’ She looked up at him. “I have to think about the twins,” she said. “They are so sensitive; I can’t allow them to live with constant tension.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “You’re a wonderful mother, Padmé,” he told her. ‘I... I wish I knew the right thing to say,’ he added. “But there is something I must ask, and I hope you’ll forgive me for asking it.”

“What is it?”

“Do you still love him?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Yes,” she replied at once. ‘I don’t think I ever stopped loving him, Obi-Wan,’ she told him, “even after Mustafar, even when he was Darth Vader.”

“Then that is what you have to hold onto, Padmé,” he replied. “The love you bear for one another is truly remarkable, for I know, despite anything else he may be right now; Anakin loves you with every fiber of his being.”

“I know he does,” she replied, wiping another tear away.

“Good morning Mom! Good morning Obi-Wan!” Leia said cheerfully as she entered the room.

“Good morning sweetheart,” Padmé replied as Leia gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Luke still sleeping?”

“I think so,” Leia replied. “I didn’t want to wake him up since he was so grouchy yesterday when I did.”

“That was very considerate of you, Leia,” Obi-Wan commented with a smile.

“I thought so,” Leia agreed as she took a seat at the table.

Upstairs

Luke was not asleep; in fact he’d slept very little that night. He’d had another disturbing dream about his mother, the most intense one yet. It had shaken Luke deeply, for he was starting to question his father’s explanation of the meaning of his dreams. Both Luke and Leia had sensed the tension between their parents, both had been worried about their mother’s emotional well-being for days. Deciding he needed some answers, Luke got out of bed to seek out his father.

Anakin stood at the fresher mirror, shaving. He was disappointed that Padmé had already left their bed earlier, and reasoned that she was still upset with him. He heard a knock on the door of the bedroom, and looked over in its direction, sensing his son on the other side. “Come in,” he called as he continued to shave.

Luke entered the room, looked around briefly, and then saw the fresher door on the other side of the room open. He walked over and stood in the doorway for a moment, watching his father as he stood in only his sleep pants, shaving.

“Hi Dad,” Luke said as he walked into the room. “Can I talk to you?”

Anakin glanced at him briefly. “Sure,” he said. “What’s on your mind?”

Luke pulled himself up onto the counter beside the sink. “Mom,” Luke replied.

Anakin stopped what he was doing and looked at his son. “Your mother? Why? Did you have another dream?”

Luke nodded, his blue eyes troubled. “A really bad one,” he told his father. “The worst one yet.”

Anakin realized that his son had no doubt sensed the tension between his parents, and it had heralded another dream. “Sorry to hear it,” he said, resuming his shaving.

Luke watched him for a moment, trying to decide what he ought to say. “You and Mom have been fighting again, haven’t you?” he asked finally.

Anakin frowned, and made no reply for a moment. “That’s none of your business, Luke,” he said.

“I love my mother,” Luke returned, surprising himself with his gumption. “I’m worried about her.”

“There’s no need to worry,” Anakin assured his son. “Married couples fight from time to time, it’s perfectly natural.”

“But you and Mom haven’t fought like this since you were still in the breath suit,” Luke returned. “When Mom first came to live with us. Things have been so good for so long— and now all of a sudden you’re fighting again. It really upsets Leia and me when you’re fighting, Dad. It scares us.”

Anakin wasn’t sure what to say at this point, and set his razor down. “Luke, I’m sorry if it upsets you,” he said. “But you’re just going to have to accept the fact that your mother and I will occasionally have differences of opinion. It’s unrealistic of you to expect otherwise.”

Luke could see that he’d annoyed his father, and so he said no more. “I guess so,” he said finally, hopping down from the counter. “I’m going to have breakfast now,” he said. “You coming?”

Anakin nodded. “Yes, I’ll be right down.”

“Okay Dad,” Luke replied, and then left the room, trying to put his fears out of his mind.

Anakin left the fresher as his son left, rebuking himself for having been so harsh with the boy. He’d vowed he would never treat Luke the way Owen had undoubtedly treated him, and

yet...*I'll make it up to him*, he vowed. *When I buy him that swoop bike he wanted for his birthday.* He smiled as he buttoned up his tunic, imagining the look on Luke's face when he was presented with his first swoop bike.

"Good morning everyone," Anakin said as he entered the breakfast room. He could feel the tension level of his wife rise as she heard his voice, but was prevented from addressing her by his assistant, Riema, who entered the room at that moment.

"Good morning, your majesties," she said. "Sir, I just go this message from General Tagge," she said, handing him a datapad.

Anakin frowned and took the device from her. "Tagge?" he asked. He activated the screen and read over the message briefly, and then looked up at Riema. 'We're leaving in thirty minutes,' he told her. "Get ready."

"Yes sir," she said, and left the room immediately.

"Is there a problem?" Obi-Wan asked, noting the look of alarm on Padmé's face.

"I hope not," Anakin replied. "But I need to check it out nonetheless," he added, starting towards the door.

Padmé stood up. "Where are you going?" she asked, exasperated that he hadn't told her.

Anakin turned back. "The Death Star," he told her. "I don't know when I'll be home," he added.

"Dad, our birthday party is in a few days!" Leia protested.

"I won't miss that, are you kidding me?" Anakin assured her with a smile. 'Now come here, both of you,' he said, holding his arms open. "I need hugs before I go."

Luke and Leia stood up from the seats and went over to their father to give him a hug. "I promise I won't miss your party," he told them as he gave them each a kiss on top of their heads. He looked up at Padmé, who was watching the three of them. "Do I get a hug from you too, Angel?" he asked.

Padmé nodded, and stood up from the table. Luke and Leia released their father so that he could hug their mother.

"Don't be gone long," she told him as he held her close.

"I won't," he assured her. "I just need to check something out."

And you don't want to tell me what it is, she reflected. "Okay," she said. "Hurry back."

Anakin kissed her on the cheek and then released her, leaving the room without eating a thing. Padmé watched him go, and then looked back at the twins, who were waiting for her reaction. She gave them a smile. "Come on," she said. "Breakfast is getting cold."

Luke and Leia returned to the table, relieved to see that their mother seemed to be handling their father's hasty departure quite well.

"Are you going to look after Riema's daughters?" Leia asked her mother.

"She has a droid who will care for them," Padmé replied. "But perhaps we ought to invite them to spend the day with us," she added.

"Yeah, that's a great idea," Luke said.

Leia looked at him with a smile. "You like Rachele, don't you?" she asked.

Luke frowned. "Eww, no way," he replied, but the blush in his cheeks said otherwise.

Padmé smiled. "Why don't you find them after breakfast?" she suggested. "You could go swimming together."

"Great idea, Mom," Leia said. She looked at Obi-Wan. 'Maybe you'd like to join us, Obi-Wan,' she added. "You haven't tried out the new pool yet."

"I would love to, Leia," Obi-Wan replied. "If I'm able to find my trunks."

"Don't tell us you lost those lovely trunks you bought on Naboo," Padmé said with a smile.

Obi-Wan assumed an expression of chagrin. "It appears so, yes," he said. "Very regrettable."

"Don't worry, Obi-Wan," Luke piped up. "We can just order you some more on the holonet!"

Obi-Wan smiled sickly. "Great," he replied. "That's....great."

The Death Star— a few hours later

General Tagge waited anxiously as the shuttle carrying the emperor settled onto the hangar floor. He was not looking forward to delivering his report to the emperor, who was not known for being particularly tolerant when it came to mistakes.

"Welcome, your majesty," Tagge said with a bow as Anakin appeared, flanked by two clones and followed by a uniformed woman Tagge did not recognize.

"Never mind the welcome," Anakin snapped. "Tell me how the hell this happened, Tagge. How did the Rebels manage to get onto this station?"

Chapter 103

One hundred and three

Death Star

"Well, sir, it's rather a long story," Tagge began as he hurried along beside Anakin.

"I have time," Anakin retorted. "Tell me what happened."

"Perhaps we ought to discuss this in private, sir," Tagge replied. "I'm a little nervous now about discussing matters of security openly," he added.

Anakin nodded. "Good thinking," he said. "Let's go."

Coruscant

Padmé had decided to take Leia into town for lunch and some shopping. She'd extended the invitation to Luke, as well as Riema's girls; but they preferred to spend the time enjoying the pool. Leia was secretly happy to have her mother all to herself, for it was a rare occasion when that happened. Of course, Han had accompanied them, but both Padmé and Leia had become quite accustomed to his presence.

"Have you decided what you want for your birthday yet?" Padmé asked Leia as they sat down to lunch. "It's coming up very quickly."

"I know," Leia replied. "And to tell you the truth, Mom, I'm not sure what I want. I already have so much; you and Daddy give me pretty much anything I want."

Padmé smiled. "Well, not quite anything," she said. "But surely there must be something you want, something you've had your eye on for a while."

"Well... there is an outfit I saw on the holonet that I really like," Leia replied. "But I don't know if Daddy would let me wear it. It's kind of grown up."

"We can have a look," Padmé told her. "Your father tends to a little on the conservative side," she added.

Leia nodded. "No kidding," she agreed. She hesitated for a moment before continuing. "Mom... why are you and Dad fighting again?" she asked.

Padmé sipped at her tea before replying. "We've had some... political disagreements, Leia," she replied. "I don't want you and Luke to worry, though," she hastened to add. "Everything is perfectly fine."

Leia wasn't totally convinced that her mother was being completely honest with her, but decided to say nothing for the time being. "Mom, there's a woman who's looking at us," she said as she noted a stranger approaching their table. "And she's coming over here right now."

Padmé turned around and was surprised to see Mon Mothma coming towards them. *Great*, she thought, but smiled nonetheless. "Hello Mon," she said. "Fancy meeting you here."

Mon Mothma smiled in return. "It's good to see you, Padmé," she said. "And you too, Leia," she added.

"Leia, you remember Senator Mothma, don't you?" Padmé asked.

"Yes of course," Leia said, although she didn't remember her at all. "It's nice to see you again, Senator."

"And this is Commander Han Solo," Padmé added. "A member of our household guard."

"Commander," Mothma said, nodding at Han.

"Senator," Han replied.

"Would it be possible to have a word with you alone, Padmé?" Mothma asked, looking at Han.

Han fought the urge to heave a great sigh. "Sure," he said. "We'll go check out the dessert carousel."

"Sweet," Leia said with a smile and then stood up to leave with Han.

Padmé was surprised by Mothma's request, and waited for her to sit down before questioning her.

"What is this all about, Mothma?" Padmé asked, keeping her eye on Leia and Han as they stood at the dessert display.

"I visited Bail Organa yesterday," Mothma informed her. "He's still in detention, you know," she added.

Padmé frowned. "Yes I know," she replied.

"We had a very interesting conversation," Mothma continued. 'He's a changed man, Padmé,' she told her. "He's humble, and contrite. And he feels terrible about what happened on Polis Massa."

"You mean when he stole my child from me?" Padmé asked bitterly.

Mothma sighed, realizing that Padmé was still very bitter. "Yes," she said, knowing it was pointless to debate semantics. "He feels terrible about that, Padmé, he's racked with guilt."

"Am I supposed to feel sorry for him?" Padmé asked incredulously.

"No, no one expects that," Mothma replied, starting to get frustrated. "I'm telling you this because he wants to see you. He asked me to tell you how much he wants to talk to you, Padmé. Won't you at least consider it?"

Death Star

"First off, tell me the damage," Anakin said as he and Tagge sat at a conference table, Anakin's guards standing by the door. "How serious a leak are we talking about?"

"We don't know yet, sir," Tagge reported.

"What do you mean, you don't know yet?" Anakin asked angrily. "How did this happen??"

"It was the supply crew that just left a few days ago, sir," Tagge reported. "They'd been here for weeks, on and off."

Anakin nodded. "And who engaged their services?" he demanded. "Were they not given a full security check?"

"It was Motti who found them, sir," Tagge told him. "I remember him boasting about how much money he saved. Seems there was a reason their services were so affordable."

Anakin clenched his fists in frustration. "Damn him," he growled. "Where are these suppliers now? And how do you know they have any information at all?"

"It wasn't easy to trace it," Tagge reported. "But yesterday one of the computer programs was acting strangely, and I called in a technician to check it out."

"Which program?" Anakin asked.

"The one that manages the security codes, sir," Tagge replied. "That's the one that they hacked."

"You're certain of this?" Anakin asked.

Tagge nodded. "Yes sir," he replied. 'There is anti-intrusion software embedded in it,' he said. "And it showed clearly that there had been a breach. There's no doubt of it, sir."

Anakin nodded, frowning as he considered this. "They have to be found," he said.

"I've already deployed five hundred clones, sir," Tagge informed him.

"Deploy another thousand," Anakin told him. He considered for a moment before continuing. 'I will return to the capital,' he told Tagge. "I think I know who might know where to find these men."

Coruscant

"That looks good, so does that....man, I can't decide," Han said with a frown.

Leia giggled. "Have them all," she suggested.

"No way," Han replied. 'I have to maintain this physique or I won't fit into the uniform,' he told her, patting his abdomen. "Ladies like the uniform," he added.

"Oh brother," Leia said, rolling her eyes. "So if ladies like the uniform, how come you don't have a girlfriend?" she asked.

"Who says I don't?" Han replied. "I do have a private life, you know."

"Sure you do," Leia teased.

"Okay, your highnessness, enough chit chat," Han said. "Just pick your dessert already."

Leia giggled again, as she always did when he called her that. "I think I'll have....that one," she said, pointing to a large piece of chocolate cake.

Han called the serving droid to come over and then made his own selection. They looked back at the table, and, seeing that Mon Mothma had left the table, walked over to rejoin Padmé.

“That looks good,” Padmé said, seeing the desserts they had chosen.

“I thought we could share this, Mom,” Leia told her as she sat down. “It’s way too big for me. I’d never fit into that outfit I want if I ate it all,” she said with a smile, looking at Han.

Han shook his head at her cheekiness, and started eating his dessert.

Later that night

It was very late when Anakin and Riema returned to the estate, and the enormous house was dark and quiet except for the household guards. After bidding his assistant a goodnight, Anakin headed upstairs.

The antique clock in the hallway on the third floor was just striking two when Anakin reached the door to his and Padmé’s bedroom. He opened the door quietly, for he could sense that she was fast asleep. Silently he walked into the room and to the fresher to get changed for bed.

The light from the fresher fell upon the bed as Anakin returned to the bedroom a few minutes later, and for a moment he simply watched Padmé as she slept. She’d thrown the covers off, as she often did in her sleep, and the silken fabric of her nightgown was bunched up around her hips, exposing her legs. Anakin found himself growing excited as he watched her sleep, and smiled as an idea came to him.

Climbing onto the bed, Anakin moved over to her. He brought his mouth to her ear, kissing it lightly.

“Ani?” she said sleepily, half wondering if she was asleep.

“I’m here, Angel,” he whispered into her ear. “I want you,” he told her kissing her earlobe...

A little while later...

“Sorry for waking you,” Anakin teased, kissing her sweaty brow.

Padmé smiled in the dark. “I forgive you,” she replied as he pulled her close.

Anakin laughed softly as he brought the covers up over them both. “Goodnight Angel,” he said with a yawn, the exhaustion he’d felt earlier hitting him hard after the physical exertion.

“Goodnight Ani. I’m glad you’re home.”

Anakin smiled, and then drifted off to sleep, his wife nestled against him in his arms.

Chapter 104

One hundred and four

Anakin and Padmé awoke within moments of one another, and lay in bed for a little while just talking. He filled her in on what had happened, and Padmé listened without comment. She was secretly happy that the Rebels had breached the security of the Death Star; for it meant that there was hope that it was indeed vulnerable.

"I had a rather interesting chat with Senator Mothma," Padmé told him.

Anakin frowned. "She came here?" he asked.

"No," Padmé replied. "Leia, Han and I went into town to do some shopping, and we ran into her at a restaurant," she explained.

"I see," Anakin replied. "And what did she want?"

"She wanted to tell me about her visit with Bail Organa," she told him. "Apparently he's had a change of heart in his isolation."

"What does that mean, exactly?" he asked.

"Well, according to Mothma, he's very contrite," Padmé reported. "He feels guilty over taking Leia and lying to me."

Anakin snorted derisively. "Why do I have trouble believing that?" he asked.

"I know what you mean," she agreed. "But I thought perhaps I would go and see him, just to set my mind at ease."

Anakin nodded thoughtfully. "I'll come with you," he told her. "Let's go this morning."

Padmé was surprised by Anakin's cooperation; little did she realize that he had his own reasons for wanting to see the former senator, reasons that had nothing to do with Leia, Pollis Massa, or Padmé herself. He decided to keep his reasons to himself for now, not wishing to engage in another argument.

"I'll go get showered," she told him, getting out of bed. "We can go after breakfast."

A short time later

"I thought we'd begin your training when you come home from school," Obi-Wan said to the twins at breakfast. "We've already gone over much of the theory; I think now it's time to start really getting down to it. What do you think younglings?"

Luke and Leia looked at one another with excitement.

"I think we're both really excited about learning how to be Jedi knights," Leia said.

"Do we get to make lightsabers soon?" Luke asked.

Obi-Wan smiled. "Patience, young one," he said. "That will come soon enough."

"I think it's awesome that you two are going to be Jedi," Rachelle spoke up. "My granddad used to tell me stories about them, until he got in trouble for it," she said with a frown.

Obi-Wan frowned too. "Well, the new emperor plans to restore the Jedi Order," he told her. "So there will be no need to fear talking about the knighthood anymore."

Riema nodded in agreement, and then glanced at her wrist chrono. "Looks like it's time for us to go, girls," she said, standing up.

Obi-Wan could sense the woman's stress and looked up at her. "Is everything all right, Riema?" he asked.

"Oh, it's nothing, really," she said as the girls stood up. "It's just that... I know the emperor is rather concerned with the developments on the Death Star. I just hope he doesn't need me while I'm taking the kids to school."

"Surely he knows you must do that each morning," Obi-Wan replied.

"Yes, and he's been very understanding of it," Riema replied. 'But with what's going on now, I don't know if he will be so understanding if he needs me and I'm not here. But it can't be helped,' she concluded. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Obi-Wan nodded, and then had an idea. He got up from the table, and went after her. "Riema wait," he called.

She turned around, a little rattled that he was delaying her further.

"Let me take them," Obi-Wan said. 'I have nothing pressing to do this morning,' he added this morning. "It would be my pleasure to escort the young ladies to school," he added, looking at the girls with a smile.

Riema was surprised by his offer. "You don't have to offer, Obi-Wan," she said. "It's kind of you to though, and I thank you. I don't want to inconvenience you."

"It's no inconvenience, I assure you," he told her. "I want to do it."

Riema considered for a moment, and looked at her girls. "You promise to behave?" she asked.

"Yes Mom," Rachelle said.

Riema knew her girls to be well behaved, and so she nodded. "Very well," she said. 'Thank you, Obi-Wan,' she said, looking up at him with a smile. "You're very kind."

Obi-Wan smiled. "Not at all," he said. 'Now come along, girls,' he said. "You mustn't be late for school."

Riema smiled as she watched him shepherd the girls away, her already considerable opinion of him skyrocketing.

"Good morning everyone," Padmé said as she and Anakin entered the room.

"Dad! You're home!" Leia exclaimed, jumping out of her chair to come and hug her father.

"I told you I'd be home for your party," Anakin assured her as he hugged her back.

"Obi-Wan says we're gonna start real training today," Luke told his parents. "Not just all that talking stuff," he added.

Anakin grinned. "He does like to talk, doesn't he?" he asked as he held out a chair for Padmé.

"Speaking of Obi-Wan, where is he?" Padmé asked. "He's usually the first one up."

"He's taking Rachelle and Jacqueline to school," Riema told them. "He offered, and wouldn't take no for an answer."

Padmé and Anakin exchanged an amused look.

"That was very kind of him," Padmé said. "He does have a way with children."

"Time to go kids," Han said as he entered the room.

"Okay," Luke said the disappointment evident in his voice. "Why do we only get two days off, and we have to go to school for five?" he wondered aloud.

Han smirked. "Not fair, is it kid?" he asked. "Come on, let's go."

A short time later— Coruscant Detention Centre

Anakin and Padmé waited in the small visiting room, two clones attending them. Padmé sat at the table while Anakin stood with his arms folded, waiting impatiently for the prisoner to be shown in. He didn't have to wait long.

Bail Organa's face bore first a look of delight upon seeing Padmé; but when he noticed that she was not alone, his expression quickly changed to one of dismay.

"Padmé, it's good to see you," Organa said as he sat down across from her. "Thank you for agreeing to see me."

"I was curious," she replied. "I found it interesting that you were so anxious to see me."

"I am, or rather I was anxious to see you," Organa replied, glancing up nervously at Anakin. "I didn't realize that you'd be bringing your husband with you," he added, looking up at Anakin with undisguised antipathy.

Anakin frowned. "Is there some reason you wanted to see my wife alone?" he challenged.

"Yes, there was," Organa replied. He looked back at Padmé. 'I've had a lot of time to think over the past few weeks,' he said, addressing Padmé and Padmé alone. "And I've come to the realization that what I did all those years ago was wrong. I never should have agreed to be part of the plot to take your children from you," he added. "And I wanted to apologize for it."

Padmé nodded. "Thank you," she replied, noting that his apology was directed solely at herself and not at Anakin. She wasn't the only one who noticed.

"Don't I get an apology too?" Anakin asked scornfully. "It was my children too that you had a hand in stealing."

Organa looked up at him, his eyes like daggers. "I believe you know how I feel about your role in the lives of Padmé and her children," he said.

"You son of a bitch," Anakin growled, taking a step closer to the table. "You have a hell of a lot of nerve..."

"Anakin, please stop," Padmé said, standing up and putting herself between the two men. "That's not what we're here for."

Anakin looked at her. "No, you're right," he said, deciding to lay all his cards on the table. "I'm here to get some answers from the good senator," he said, glaring at Organa. "Answers about the presence of rebel spies on board the Death Star."

Bail's eyes widened at this, for it was the last thing he expected Anakin to say. And in that brief moment of surprise, Anakin knew for certain that his hunch had been correct.

"How would I know anything about that?" Organa spat, having regained his composure. "I've been rotting in here for months now, Vader, thanks to you."

"Don't insult my intelligence, Organa," Anakin retorted angrily. "Surely you know I have ways of getting information."

A look of fear flashed through Organa's eyes at this, and he looked at Padmé as though for help. "Still convinced that he's changed, Padmé?" he asked bitterly.

Padmé glared at him. "You really do have a lot of nerve expecting me to take your side," she said. "And as for your apology, if I weren't a lady I'd tell you what you could do with it. How dare you refuse to include the father of my children in it? You should be begging for his forgiveness as much as mine!"

"I'd rather die," Organa said, turning his eyes to Anakin's.

"That can certainly be arranged," Anakin returned. "Let's go Padmé," he said, taking his wife's hand. "You don't want to be here when the good senator is interrogated. It is bound to be rather... unpleasant."

Padmé nodded, and then left the room with Anakin as the clones moved in to take Organa to the interrogation room.

"I want you to go home," Anakin said as he and Padmé stepped on the lift. "This could take a while."

"Why didn't you tell me that was the reason you wanted to come with here with me?" Padmé asked as soon as the doors closed on them, leaving them alone.

"What difference does it make?" he asked, bewildered by her anger.

"I'd just like to have known what I was walking into," she replied, looking away from him. "That was very unpleasant."

"I'm sorry," he replied, growing rather exasperated. "But Organa is probably directly linked to the security breach on the Death Star. I needed to talk to him to see if my hunch about him was right. And it was; I could see it clearly in his mind, Padmé. There's no doubt that he had a hand in this entire scheme, since according to Tagge the suppliers who turned

out to have Rebel spies in their midst were hired months ago. *Months ago*, Padmé— before Organa was arrested. Don't you see?"

"Yes, I see," she replied tiredly. "I suppose I just don't like to be used in your political game of cat and mouse."

Anakin frowned. "Is *that* what you think this is? A *game*?" he asked incredulously.

"It's just a figure of speech, Anakin," she said tiredly. 'I don't want to fight about this. You do what you have to do,' she told him as the lift stopped. "I'm going home to finish the preparations for our children's' party." She started off the lift and then turned to him. "You *will* be there for the party, won't you?" she asked.

"Of course I will," he replied. "I promised the twins, and I would never break a promise to them. Or to you."

Padmé nodded, and then continued on her way, doing her best to maintain her decorum in front of the guards who flanked her.

Anakin watched her walk away, frustrated by the wall that had arisen once again between them.

"We're ready, Your Majesty," announced a voice on Anakin's comlink.

"I'll be right there," he replied, and closed the lift doors.

Chapter 105

One hundred and five

Padmé returned home to find a message waiting for her from her sister. Immediately she contacted her, suddenly anxious to talk to Sola.

“Hi Padmé,” Sola said with a smile upon seeing her sister on the screen. “How’s life in the royal palace?”

“Pretty good,” Padmé replied. “I’m just finishing up some last minute details for the twins’ party.”

“That’s why I contacted you,” Sola told her. “I’m afraid it will be just me coming. The girls are in the middle of exams, and Darred is off on a business trip.”

“I understand,” Padmé replied. “I’m sure the twins will too.”

Sola regarded her sister for a moment, getting the distinct impression that something was bothering her. “Padmé is everything okay?” she asked. “You seem kind of down.”

Padmé smiled. “I never could hide anything from you, could I?” she said.

“Not a chance,” Sola replied. “What is it? Please tell me things are still good between you and Anakin.”

“I wish I could tell you that,” Padmé replied. “But lately things have been very strained between us.”

“I’m sorry to hear it,” Sola said. She considered for a moment and then decided to make a suggestion. ‘Could you use some help with the planning?’ she asked. “I could come early if you need me to.”

Padmé smiled. “Yes, I would love it if you did,” she said. “Thank you, Sola. What would I do without you?”

Later that afternoon

“Now, you must be careful with this, Leia,” Obi-Wan instructed, handing her Anakin’s lightsaber. “A lightsaber is a dangerous weapon.”

Leia nodded as she held the weapon reverently in her hands. “This was my father’s?” she asked in awe.

Obi-Wan nodded. “Yes, one of many he built while under my tutelage,” he said. “He had a way of... misplacing them,” he added with a smile.

“Why doesn’t he use that one now?” Luke asked.

Obi-Wan didn’t want to tell them about the bloody history of the weapon, for it was his hope to be able to create a new one for the weapon, starting this day, with the initiation of the new birth of the Jedi Order. “He has his own now,” he replied at last. ‘I suppose he’s used to it

now.' He turned back to Leia. "Now Leia, the remote will emit laser pulses," he told her. "They're not very powerful, but they'll give you a good zap if you're not careful."

Luke grinned. "This is gonna be awesome," he said, sitting back to watch his sister.

Leia squared her shoulders and focused on the remote, determined to show up her brother. She turned on the lightsaber and watched as Obi-Wan prepared to activate the remote.

"Ready?" he asked.

Leia nodded, tightening her grip on the lightsaber's hilt.

Obi-Wan stood back to where Luke was sitting and watched with half trepidation half excitement as Leia used the lightsaber to deflect the pulses of the energy. *She's a natural*, he thought with amazement as she moved quickly and fluidly, reminding Obi-Wan very much of her father.

"Very well done, Leia," Obi-Wan said when the program ended and Leia turned off the weapon's energy beam.

She smiled broadly, pleased by his praise and exhilarated by her success. Leia walked over to Luke and handed him the lightsaber. "Top that," she challenged.

"Piece of cake," Luke declared, taking the lightsaber and jumping up from his seat. He ignited it, and then waited as Obi-Wan reset the remote.

Obi-Wan watched Luke perform with as much skill and agility as Leia had, not at all surprised that the twins were equally gifted.

"Can we do it again, Obi-Wan?" Leia asked eagerly as Luke's turn ended.

Obi-Wan nodded. "Of course," he replied. "Let's try a more challenging program, though, shall we?"

"I'm up for that," Luke piped up. "Are you?" he asked his sister.

Leia nodded. "Just watch me," she told him with a smile as she took the lightsaber back from him.

Obi-Wan chuckled, hoping he had what it took to train two Anakin Skywalkers. *Perhaps it's time to bring in reinforcements*, he mused as he watched Leia go through her paces. *I'm getting to old to do this alone.*

Detention Centre

Anakin left the interrogation room, leaving the clones to escort Bail Organa back to his cell. He had managed to glean some information from Organa, but not as much as he'd hoped. There was a time, not that long ago, when Anakin would have stopped at nothing to get the information he sought. Reducing prisoners to little more than mental vegetables, or worse, had been all in a days work for Darth Vader. But Vader was gone; and Anakin was not about to resort to the ruthlessness he'd once employed. For as much as he felt compelled to put an end to the conflict in the galaxy that the Rebellion represented to him, Anakin refused to give in to the Darkness that had once claimed his soul.

Anakin made his way home, pondering his next move. Organa's mind had furnished him with enough information to narrow the search that was already underway. Anakin felt confident that within a few days he would have the treacherous spies in his custody. *And then it will only be a matter of time before the Rebellion is quelled once and for all*, he thought confidently. *And once it is, the galaxy will finally be safe for Padmé and our children.*

Upon entering the house, Anakin was greeted by the ever efficient See Threepio.

"Good afternoon, Master Anakin," the droid said.

"Hi Threepio," Anakin replied. "Where is everyone?"

"Master Luke and Miss Leia are in the gymnasium with Master Kenobi," the droid reported. 'Miss Padmé is outside having a swim,' he continued. "And..."

But Anakin didn't wait around for the rest of the droid's report, and headed outside to find his wife.

Padmé had finished her swim, and was standing with her robe on, leaning on the railing that overlooked the enormous rose garden. She was happy that Sola had offered to come to Coruscant early, for Padmé certainly needed her support right now.

Suddenly she felt strong arms encircle her waist from behind.

"Hello there gorgeous," Anakin said as he kissed her on the cheek.

"Hello," she replied. "I didn't expect to see you back so soon."

Anakin could sense that she was still upset about what had happened earlier, and turned her to face him. "Disappointed?" he asked.

"Of course not," she replied at once. "I just figured that you'd still be conducting your interrogation."

"No, that's done," he told her.

She looked up at him. "And? Or do I even want to know?" she asked.

"And I was able to learn quite a bit from him," Anakin told her. "Enough to narrow to focus of the search."

"Good," she said. "And Bail? Is he still alive?"

Anakin frowned. "Of course he is," he replied. "I'm not Darth Vader anymore, Padmé. I thought you realized that."

Padmé turned back to the railing and rested her hands on it once more. "I'm not sure any more, to tell you the truth."

"What is that supposed to mean?" he asked.

"It means that you've been acting like him lately," she told him. "That I'm afraid you're becoming him again," she added. "And the thought of that terrifies me." She turned to him, ignoring the look of shock on his face. "Obi-Wan assures me that there is no darkness left in you, but sometimes I don't know if he's right, Anakin."

"There is no darkness," he averred. "And I can't believe that you'd question that."

"I can't help it, Anakin," she replied, turning away from him again. "Do you remember that nightmare I had the other night?"

"Yes."

"It was about Mustafar," she told him, looking back at him once more. "It was about the conversation we had, where you accused me of siding with Obi-Wan. And then it changed into today, into the current crisis we're in. You called me a traitor, and accused me of being part of the Rebellion. And then you tried to kill me, just as it happened ten years ago."

Anakin listened to her in silence, the anxiety blossoming within him as he did so. The thought that she could even think he'd do that again to her made his blood run cold. Had he really upset her so much that her subconscious was doing this to her?

"I had no idea you felt this way, Angel," he told her, walking over to her again. 'I know we're not agreeing on things right now,' he continued, turning her to face him once more. "But I promise you there is not a chance in this universe that I'm turning back to the Dark Side. I lost everything I love once because I chose it, I won't make that mistake again."

Padmé looked up at him, wanting to believe him, needing to. "I know you feel that way," she said. "And I wish I could believe you without reservation," she added. "But when I hear the way you talk about the Rebel Alliance, when I see how bent you are on destroying them... it makes me wonder if the darkness is truly gone."

"Padmé, the Rebel Alliance represents chaos and instability in the galaxy," Anakin retorted. "I don't know why you can't see that!"

"The Rebel Alliance has been fighting against the Empire for ten years," she countered. "Against the Empire that Palpatine created. You seem to forget that, Anakin. You're defending a regime that Palpatine built on the blood of the Jedi, on thousands of innocent beings!"

"Padmé, I'm in control of the Empire now," he reminded her. "I now have an opportunity to change things, to make things better, don't you see? I have an opportunity to make amends for what I helped him do. But so long as the Rebellion exists, I won't be able to make any headway at all. They do nothing but destroy, Padmé. They don't care about peace, just anarchy."

"Then talk to them," she countered. "Tell them you want peace; assure them that you're not Palpatine. It was my hope that you and Bail would be able to talk, to..."

"Bail? You expect me to talk to that arrogant bastard who hates me so much he won't even apologize to me for stealing my daughter?" he retorted angrily.

"He was way out of line doing that, I agree," she replied. "But if you just give him a chance, lay out your plans for the future, you..."

"No, Padmé," he interjected. "He and I will *never* be allies. If he is the best that the Rebel Alliance has to offer, then there will never be a peaceful end to this situation."

Padmé nodded. "I'm sorry you feel that way," she said, sorely disappointed.

Just then Luke and Leia appeared, and each of them ran over to a parent.

"Guess what, Dad?" Luke said. "Obi-Wan said we're gonna start our lightsabers this week!" he said.

"He just needs to get the materials we need," Leia added. "Isn't that awesome?"

Anakin nodded, putting an arm around each of them. "It's fantastic," he replied with a smile. 'And a huge step in your training as Jedi padawans. I want to be there when you're building them,' he told them. "Obi-Wan is going to need some help training the two of you," he added.

Luke and Leia laughed. "Yeah, that's what he said too," Luke reported.

"Well, this is shaping up to be a very exciting week, isn't it?" Padmé said, smiling at the twins. "A birthday party and now lightsabers too? My goodness, what next?"

"Maybe....swoop bikes?" Luke suggested hopefully.

Padmé merely smiled. "Time for dinner," she said, deflecting Luke's query. "Let's go."

Anakin followed his family inside, his mind working furious to think of a way to make this situation work.

Luke and Leia monopolized the conversation over dinner, for they were both brimming over with excitement about the upcoming party as well as the new developments in their Jedi training.

Anakin and Padmé indulged them, both too charmed by their enthusiasm to even attempt to curb it.

"Sounds like you've got your hands full with these two padawans," Anakin remarked, looking at Obi-Wan. "Could you use some help?"

"Absolutely," Obi-Wan replied. "That is, if your duties as emperor will allow you the time."

"Of course," Anakin replied, looking at the twins. "I'll make the time," he assured them.

Padmé said nothing, hoping that Anakin was sincere in his promise. *Don't disappoint them Anakin*, she thought. *I'll never forgive you if you break their hearts now.*

Later that night

Padmé awoke in the middle of the night to find herself alone in the bed. She looked over to the fresher, expecting to see the light under the door, but did not. Sitting up in bed, she frowned, wondering where Anakin was.

"Ani?" she called.

"I'm in here," he called. "At the computer."

Padmé got out of bed and walked into the antechamber that was attached to the master bedroom. Anakin was sitting at the computer, seemingly engrossed in something he had found on the holonet.

"What are you doing?" she asked as she walked over to him.

"Shopping," he told her.

"You hate shopping," she reminded him, coming to stand beside him.

"I know," he replied. "But this is different."

"How so?"

"It's for the kids," he told her. "I think I've found everything we'll need."

"For what?" she asked, looking at the computer screen.

"To build lightsabers," he told her, looking up at her briefly. "It's time for them to build their first one. And I think it's time for me to build a new one, too. I'm carrying a Sith blade right now. I don't want to do that anymore, Padmé."

Padmé was touched by his statement, and ran her hand across his back. "I think that's a wonderful idea," she told him.

Anakin smiled and looked at her again. "I never want you to doubt that the darkness is gone, Padmé," he said, wrapping an arm around her waist. "I never want you to be afraid of that happening again."

"I know," she replied, letting him pull her onto his lap. "I wish there wasn't so much tension between us right now. I hate it."

"So do I," he told her. "What would you say if I told you I plan to give up being emperor eventually?"

Padmé looked at him. "I hope you mean that," she said.

"Of course I do," he assured her. "My goal is to stabilize things, and eventually return government control to the Senate."

"Ani, that's wonderful!" she cried, throwing her arms around him. "I'm so happy to hear you say this!"

Anakin hugged her back. "It won't happen over night," he told her. "Before I can relinquish control, I have to ensure that there is peace in the galaxy. And to do that, I need to deal with the Alliance."

Padmé pulled back and looked at him. "You mean you're willing to talk to them?" she asked hopefully.

Anakin nodded. "You give me a contact, and I'll talk to them", he replied.

"Ani, I've been out of circulation for ten years," she told him. "You would have far more knowledge than me about who might or might not be involved."

"Yes, that's true," he replied. "You really don't have any way of knowing the political leanings of anyone in the Senate."

Padmé had the distinct impression that he was trying to maneuver her into agreeing to sit in on the Senate sessions in order to gain information for him. But he did not; he'd said he

wouldn't bring up the issue again, and, to his credit, he hadn't.

"Come on," she said. "Let's go back to bed."

"I'll be right there," he told her as she stood up. "I just want to make sure these materials are here by tomorrow night."

"Okay," she said, kissing him on the cheek. "Luke and Leia will be so excited."

Anakin smiled.

Chapter 106

One hundred and six

“Good morning Obi-Wan.”

Obi-Wan looked up and smiled as Riema and her daughters joined him at the breakfast table.

“Good morning,” he said, standing up at once. “And how are the lovely Heckmann ladies this morning?” he asked.

Rachelle and Jacqueline giggled, loving how Obi-Wan treated them like grown ups.

“We’re all good, right Mom?” Rachelle asked.

Riema nodded. “Yes, absolutely,” she agreed.

“Good morning everyone,” Padmé said as she and the twins entered the room.

“Good morning Milady,” Riema said as Obi-Wan stood to pull out a chair for Padmé.

“Thank you Obi-Wan,” Padmé said.

“Guess what we’re doing after school today,” Leia asked Rachelle.

“What are you doing?” Rachelle asked.

“We’re starting our lightsabers,” Luke piped up, stealing Leia’s thunder.

“Cool!” Rachelle replied as Leia shot Luke a dirty look.

“Well, we have to gather the materials first,” Obi-Wan reminded the twins. “That may not be easy, considering the fact that there have been no Jedi around in a decade,” he told them.

“Oh, I don’t think you need to worry about finding the materials,” Padmé said with a knowing smile.

“What do you mean, Mom?” Leia asked.

Padmé made a zipping motion over her lips. “I’m not saying another word,” she said. “You’ll just have to wait and see.”

Luke and Leia looked at one another with a smile, knowing that if they worked at it enough, they could wheedle the information out of one of their parents eventually.

“I have some other good news,” Padmé continued. “Your Aunt Sola is arriving today.”

“Aunt Sola’s coming?” Leia asked excitedly.

“Yes, she’s coming for the party, but decided to come a few days early,” Padmé explained. ‘Unfortunately your causing can’t come,’ she added. “They have exams right now.”

“Do we have to go to school today, Mom?” Luke asked hopefully. “Since she’s coming, shouldn’t we be here to help welcome her?”

Padmé smiled. “Oh, I think you’ll be able to give her a perfectly wonderful welcome when you come home from school,” she said. “But nice try, Luke.”

Luke shrugged sheepishly, and then proceeded to eat his breakfast.

“Good morning everyone,” Anakin said as he entered the room. He bent to give Padmé a kiss on the cheek before taking a seat beside her.

“Dad, are we going to be able to make our lightsabers today?” Leia asked.

Anakin smiled as he helped himself to some breakfast. “Perhaps,” he replied. “I guess we’ll have to wait and see, won’t we?”

Luke and Leia both sighed, deciding they’d get no information from their parents.

Later that afternoon

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Padmé said as she embraced her sister warmly.

“It’s wonderful to be here,” Sola replied, hugging Padmé with equal warmth. “You didn’t tell me that you’d moved,” she said as they left the docking bay where Padmé’s personal shuttle had brought Sola.

“Anakin thought we needed a bigger place,” Padmé explained. “A larger place.”

“Large is an understatement,” Sola commented as they stepped into a smaller shuttle that would bring them to the house. “Your own landing platform? This place must be huge!”

Padmé smiled. “You could say so, yes,” she replied.

Sola watched out the windows of the shuttle as they flew over the grounds, the spectacular gardens amazing her. “Just how big is the estate?” she asked.

“Almost one thousand hectares,” Padmé replied. ‘It’s too big, really,’ she added. “I don’t see the point of it all personally; but Anakin felt that since he’s the emperor now we ought to have a fitting residence.”

Sola nodded. “Is that the source of the tension you mentioned?” she asked.

“No, it’s far more complicated than that I’m afraid,” Padmé replied as the shuttle settled on the small landing pad behind the house. ‘Come in and I’ll explain,’ she said. “I need a cup of tea.”

Sola was astonished by the size and grandeur of the house as she and Padmé entered the main hall. Padmé felt rather self-conscious by her sister’s awe, and did her best to downplay it. But it was rather difficult given the opulence that pervaded every corner of the grand house.

“So tell me what’s going on, Padmé,” Sola asked as she and Padmé sat in one of the house’s many sitting rooms.

Padmé watched the serving droid as it set a tray of tea and scones on the small table between her and her sister, trying to decide where to begin.

“Our differences are political,” she said finally as Sola picked up a cup of tea. “We’ve always had difficulty seeing things eye to eye when it comes to politics, and now that he’s emperor, it just seems to be magnified ten fold.”

“I’m sorry Padmé,” Sola said. “But just how bad is it? If you say you’ve always had ideological differences, then surely you must be used to it by now.”

“But you see, it’s more than ideology now, Sola,” Padmé replied. ‘He’s in charge, he’s running the Empire. That makes a huge difference. I don’t agree with many of the decisions he’s making, and it’s creating a lot of tension between us. We argue a lot, and sometimes....’ She stopped as her emotions rose to the surface. “It’s just so difficult sometimes, Sola,” she said softly as the tears started in her eyes. “I want so much to support him, to help him make the galaxy a better place; but he just won’t see things the way I do, and I fear that the power he wields is changing him. It *has* changed him, I’m certain of it.”

“How so?” Sola asked. “I don’t understand, Padmé. Is he turning back to the Dark Side?”

“No, no it’s not that,” Padmé replied. ‘Sometimes he’s so arrogant, sometimes it’s like he doesn’t appreciate me or the twins or our lives together... and then other times he’ll do things that makes me think everything is just fine, and that I’m overreacting. It’s just been... so very stressful, the past few weeks,’ she said, wiping a tear away. “I’m sorry, I don’t know why I’m so emotional,” she sniffed. “I guess it’s just all the tension, all the uncertainty.”

Sola nodded. “Yes, I can see how stressed you are,” she said with a frown. “And it worries me, Padmé. Does he know how you feel? Have you told him how you’re feeling?”

“Yes,” Padmé replied. “I have. And he assures me that he’s doing what he needs to do to make the galaxy safe.”

Sola sighed. “I wish I knew what to tell you, Padmé,” she said. “I’m not sure I do, though. You know him better than anyone. But if the two of you love one another as much as I think you do, then surely you can work through all this.”

“That is my hope,” Padmé replied, wiping another tear away.

“Aunt Sola!” Leia exclaimed as she and Luke rushed into the room.

Sola smiled and stood up to embrace her nephew and niece. “Hello Leia! Luke! It’s so wonderful to see you again!”

“We’re so happy you can come to our party,” Luke told her. “Only three more days!” he added excitedly.

“I wouldn’t miss it for anything,” Sola assured him.

Padmé watched with a smile as Luke and Leia sat down with their aunt and proceeded to catch her up on everything that had transpired in their lives since she’d seen them last. Sola listened with patient enthusiasm as the twins took turns telling her all about school, their new house, new friends, Jedi training....

I hope you realize how lucky you are to have this family, Anakin Skywalker, she thought. And I hope to heavens you don’t do anything stupid to mess it up.

Luke and Leia insisted upon giving their aunt a full tour of the house. Padme came along as well, simply to enjoy the company of her sister. It took nearly two hours for the twins to show Sola every part of the house and by then Sola was fully impressed and quite overwhelmed by the stately home.

“How do you keep from getting lost?” she asked as they made their way to dinner.

“We don’t use a good portion of the house, actually,” Padmé replied.

“That helps,” Sola replied.

“I think Obi-Wan got lost a couple of times,” Luke informed them. “But he won’t admit it.”

Sola laughed. “I’m rather surprised that he’s living here with you,” she told Padmé. “After what happened all those years ago.”

“That’s in the past,” Padmé told her. “He has apologized, and is doing everything he can to atone for what he did. Anakin and him are friends again, Sola; good friends. And I can’t tell you how much it warms my heart to see it.”

Dinner was a warm, enjoyable event that evening. Anakin was as welcoming to Sola as Padmé and the twins had been, and everyone was enjoying a fine meal and enjoyable conversation. Dessert had just been served when Threepio entered the room bearing a large box.

“Excuse me, Master Anakin,” the droid announced. “But this package just arrived for you.”

Anakin stood up and took the parcel from the droid’s hands at once as Luke and Leia watched with curiosity. “Thanks, Threepio,” he said.

“What’s that, Dad?” Luke asked. “A birthday present for someone?”

“In a matter of speaking, I suppose it is,” Anakin replied, coming over and setting the box down on a side table. “Come and have a look you two.”

Luke and Leia jumped out of their seats to investigate at once, and in a matter of seconds, had opened the package.

“What is all this stuff?” Leia asked as she and Luke looked at the contents of the box which seemed rather strange and not the least bit exciting to either of them.

Anakin looked over at Obi-Wan. “I think Obi-Wan can help you figure it out,” he said.

Obi-Wan stood up, having been rather curious himself, and walked over to the box. After a moment’s inspection he smiled. “Well, this is certainly a well timed gift,” he said. “Do you know what this is, younglings?” he asked.

The twins shook their heads.

“These are the very materials we need to build lightsabers,” Obi-Wan told them. “Looks like there’s enough for more than two, however,” he added, looking up at Anakin.

"There is," he said. "I'm building a new one too. I don't want to carry a red blade any longer."

"But Dad, Obi-Wan still has your old one," Luke said. "We've been using it to practice."

Anakin looked at Obi-Wan in surprise. "You have??"

"I thought perhaps we ought to...rewrite the history of that particular weapon," Obi-Wan explained.

Anakin nodded. "I see," he replied, still uneasy with the thought of his children handling the very blade that had slain so many. "Well I'd like a new one, nonetheless," he said.

"Can we start on them now?" Leia asked hopefully.

"Right after dessert," Anakin said with a smile. "You know what a sweet tooth Obi-Wan has," he added.

Obi-Wan laughed. "That is certainly true," he agreed as they returned to the table.

Padmé reached over and put her hand on Anakin's as he took his place once again beside her. "You've made them so happy," she told him with a smile. "What a wonderful birthday present, Ani."

Anakin smiled, and picked up her hand to give it a kiss. "It's as much a gift for me as it is for them," he told her. "Just to see them take these first steps towards becoming Jedi is so exciting for me, Angel," he added, looking at Luke and Leia as they wolfed down their dessert.

Serving droids had just started clearing the table when Anakin's comlink sounded.

"Excuse me," he said, standing up from the table. He walked over to the door as he activated the device. "Go ahead," he said.

"It's Tagge here, sir," Tagge's voice was heard. "You'll be pleased to hear that the spies have been apprehended."

Anakin smiled. "Excellent," he replied. "Where are they now?" he asked.

"En route here, sir," Tagge replied. "I thought you'd want to interrogate them yourself," he continued.

"I do," Anakin replied. "I'll be there as soon as possible. Skywalker out."

Anakin turned off the device and turned to see Padmé standing nearby.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"The Death Star," he told her. "The spies have been arrested."

"Good," she said. "But why do you have to leave?"

"To interrogate them," he told her. "I don't need to tell you how important this is, Padmé."

"No you don't," she replied. "But you have many competent officers who can do that for you," she added. "Why does it have to be you?"

"I'm the emperor," he said, a little tersely. "It's my job, Padmé."

"And what about Luke and Leia?" she asked. "They're looking forward so much to building their lightsabers with you tonight. Don't they matter??"

"Of course they matter!" he replied. "And it takes weeks to build a lightsaber, Padmé. Just because I'm not here tonight doesn't mean I won't be there to help them along the way. Besides, if I go now, I'll be sure to be back for the party. If I wait..."

"I see," she replied. "You're going no matter what I say."

"You don't seem to understand the importance of this situation," Anakin replied. "This is a volatile situation that has to be handled just right."

"And you're the only one who can do that, right?" she asked.

"Yes I am. I'm the emperor," he said again.

"Yes I know," she replied. "Seems to me that being the emperor means more to you than being Luke and Leia's father," she added, and then turned and walked away.

Anakin wanted to make a reply, but decided against it. *It would only make matters worse*, he decided. But he didn't want to leave without saying goodbye to the twins, and walked back into the dining room.

"I'm sorry, but I have to leave," Anakin told Luke and Leia, who were inspecting the contents of the box.

They looked up at him, the same expression of disappointment in their eyes.

"Leave?? Why? Where are you going?" Leia asked.

"I have something to take care of," he told her, putting a hand on each of them. "But I'll be back in time for your party, I swear it."

Luke and Leia nodded, both feeling terribly disappointed.

Anakin gave them each a hasty kiss on top of their heads, and then looked over at Riema. "You're with me," he told her, and then left the room.

Riema stood up, looking at Obi-Wan. He knew what she wanted to ask and smiled. "Don't worry," he assured her. "I'll be sure they get to bed on time."

"Thank you," she said, and then gave each of the girls a kiss. "I'll be back as soon as I'm able," she told them, and then left the room too.

"I'm sorry, younglings," Obi-Wan said, walking over to the twins, trying to smooth things over. "Your father is a busy man. But that doesn't mean we can't get started," he added, trying to boost their spirits.

"Can we watch, Obi-Wan?" Jacqueline asked hopefully.

"Of course," Obi-Wan said with a smile. "Now come along, younglings," he said, picking up the box. "Let's get these things sorted out."

The four children followed Obi-Wan out of the room and to the workshop, leaving Padmé alone with Sola.

“I’m sorry,” Sola said, seeing how upset Padmé was despite her best efforts to hide it.

Padmé turned to her, shaking her head. “I don’t believe that just happened,” she said. “You heard him, Sola; you heard him promise the kids he’d help them with their lightsabers. And yet...”

“I suppose duty comes first,” Sola offered.

Padmé frowned. “I don’t know anymore what to think,” she sighed. “And I don’t know how much more of this I can take, Sola.”

Sola frowned. “What do you mean?” she asked.

Padmé looked at her sister. “I mean... I think I’m pregnant, Sola.”

Chapter 107

One hundred and seven

Sola was too stunned to reply for a moment, for this was the last thing she had expected Padmé to say.

“What makes you think so?” Sola asked finally. “I mean... have you done a test?”

“No,” Padmé admitted. “But I’m late.”

“So why haven’t you done one?” Sola asked.

“At first I just assumed that it was all the stress that was making me late. But it’s been ten days now, Sola. I don’t think it’s the stress.”

Sola nodded. “I take it you haven’t been taking any precautions,” she said.

“None,” Padmé replied. “Ever since I had that miscarriage I’ve been hoping to get pregnant again.”

“So why aren’t you happy?” Sola asked. “I don’t understand.”

“What if it happens again, Sola?” Padmé replied. “It was because of stress that I miscarried before. And the doctors told me having one could make me more prone to having another. What if all the tension between us causes me to lose this baby too?” she asked as tears sprang to her eyes. “I don’t think I could take that, Sola! I couldn’t go through that again!”

Sola got off of her chair and came over to where Padmé sat. She wrapped her arms around her protectively. “Let’s not jump to conclusions, Padmé,” she said. “You don’t even know for certain that you *are* pregnant. Have you told Anakin about your suspicions?”

“No,” Padmé answered. “You know, he has the ability to sense if I was,” she told her sister.

“And has he said anything?” Sola asked.

Padmé shook her head.

“Well then you’re probably not,” Sola reasoned. “Otherwise he’d know it already.”

“Maybe,” Padmé replied. “Or maybe he’s too involved in running the Empire that he isn’t aware of this child’s existence.”

Sola didn’t want to say so, but she’d thought the very same thing. “Come on,” she said, standing up, “come with me.”

“Where are we going?” Padmé asked.

“We’re going into town to get you a home pregnancy test. The way I see it, you’ll have no peace until you know one way or another.”

“And if I am? What then?” Padmé asked.

“Then it will be time to have a serious heart to heart with your husband” Sola replied. “Come on.”

En route to the Death Star

Anakin sat brooding as his ship made its way to the Death Star. The conversation, or rather the argument he’d had with Padmé earlier still bothered him greatly. It frustrated him that she seemed unable to understand the urgency of the situation. *Why can’t she see that I’m doing what’s necessary?* He thought in frustration. The expression of disappointment in his children’s eyes also preyed on his mind. *They’ll forget all about this when their swoop bikes arrive*, he thought with confidence. Padmé hadn’t liked the idea, thinking that Luke and Leia were too young for such a ‘dangerous device’; but Anakin had assured her that they carried enough of his genes to be able to drive with complete safety and skill. *Hell, I was younger than they are when I was in pod races*, he reflected; *they’re more than old enough for swoop bikes*.

“Sir, the pilot reports that we’re about to revert to sub light,” Reima told him, interrupting his musings.

Anakin looked up at her. “Good,” he replied. “Contact Tagge and tell him to expect us within the hour.”

Coruscant

Wearing a hooded cloak to hide her face, Padmé entered the large shopping plaza.

“There’s something I want to get for Leia while we’re here,” Padmé said as they approached Leia’s favorite shop.

Sola had the impression that Padmé was stalling, but said nothing.

Finally, after several more purchases, they arrived at a pharmacy.

“Here, let me buy this,” Sola said, picking up a test kit. “It would be all over the news in an hour if the empress was seen buying a home pregnancy kit.”

Padmé decided that her sister had a point, and let her buy the test kit.

“Let’s go,” Sola said. “The suspense is killing me.”

Padmé felt the very same way.

Death Star

“So where are they?” Anakin asked as Tagge met him in the hangar bay. “Where are you holding them?”

“Those who are stable enough are in the detention block,” Tagge replied. “The rest are in the medical wing.”

Anakin stopped in his tracks and turned to look at Tagge. “What?? Am I missing something?”

‘Well sir, there was a rather....vigorous pursuit of their ship,’ Tagge replied nervously. “And I’m afraid it sustained some rather heavy damage in the process.”

“Damn it Tagge,” Anakin responded hotly, “didn’t you tell your men to take them alive?”

“Yes sir,” Tagge replied. “Of course. But it seems that they resorted to more...aggressive means when the ship refused to surrender.”

Anakin sighed in frustration. “So how many casualties?”

“Two dead,” Tagge responded. “Two more are in serious condition.”

Anakin’s frown grew. “So exactly how many are in the detention block, then?” he demanded.

“Uh... one sir,” Tagge reported. “She was only slightly injured.”

“Well I suppose we’ll have to start with her,” Anakin reasoned, starting on his way again.

“Yes sir,” Tagge agreed, starting after him. “I have a translator droid ready and standing by.”

“Let me guess, she doesn’t speak Standard,” Anakin asked.

“I’m afraid not, sir.”

“Perfect,” Anakin growled. “Just...perfect.”

Coruscant

Padme and Sola arrived back at the estate and were immediately besieged by Luke and Leia.

“What did you buy?” Leia asked, eyeing the packages with interest.

“None of your business,” Sola told her with a smile.

“How did you two make out with your lightsabers?” Padmé asked as Threepio relieved her and Sola of their parcels.

“Okay I guess,” Luke replied. “It’s just not the same without Dad here,” he added glumly.

Padme nodded. “I know,” she replied. “Any homework?” she asked, deciding she needed to change the subject.

“A little,” Leia told her.

“Well then get to it,” Padme said as she and Sola started up the stairs. “It will be bed time soon.”

Luke and Leia watched their mother ascend the staircase, both of them deciding that there was something going on with her.

“Okay, sit down,” Sola instructed as soon as they’d arrived in the master bedroom.

Padmé sat down on the bed as Sola opened the package. “I’ll need a small sample of your blood,” she explained.

Holding out a finger, Padmé could feel her heart racing as Sola approached her with the small needle. She pricked it at the end of Padmé’s finger and took the sample of blood over to

the dresser where she'd left the rest of the kit. Padme watched as her sister slid it into the small receptacle.

"We only have to wait a few seconds," Sola told her sister, looking back at her.

Padme nodded in understanding, knowing that the next few seconds would seem a lot longer.

"You ready?" Sola asked, standing with her back to Padmé.

"Yes, for heavens sake, just tell me!" Padmé replied.

Sola turned around with the small device in her hand. "It's positive, Padmé," she reported. "You're pregnant."

Death Star

Anakin found interrogating a prisoner via a translator to be extremely frustrating and almost a complete waste of time. Being unable to communicate directly to her, Anakin was unable to use the Force to manipulate his questions and draw forth the answers he sought. Probing her mind revealed very little; she was not lying about not speaking Standard, and seemed to be a relatively new member of the Rebel Alliance. Clearly she was not the one who would give him the information he needed. *I just hope the one with all the information didn't die*, he thought in frustration as he left the cell block.

"I want to see the prisoners in the medical bay," Anakin told Tagge as they stepped on to the lift.

"But sir, they're still unconscious," Tagge informed him.

"That may not be a problem," Anakin replied, hoping against hope that he was right.

Coruscant

Sola watched her sister as the emotions flitted through her eyes. "Padmé?" she said. "Are you okay?"

Padme looked up at her. "Yes... I... I guess I'm just... I don't know how to feel, Sola," she admitted. "I'm thrilled to be having another baby, but..."

"But you're scared," Sola finished for her, sitting down beside her on the bed.

Padmé nodded.

Sola put her arm around Padmé's shoulders. "I know," she replied. "But Anakin loves you, and you love him. Once he knows that there's another baby on the way, don't you think he'll cool it with all the emperor nonsense?"

Padmé smiled at her sister's choice of words. "I don't know," she replied. "I wish he was here so I could tell him," she sighed.

"Why don't you contact him?" Sola suggested.

"No, I don't want to tell him over a comlink," Padme replied. "Besides, he'll be home before the end of the week. He promised the twins."

“Yes he did,” Sola replied. “So tell him when he gets back.”

Padmé nodded. “This party will be even more exciting for us than we’d anticipated,” she said with a smile.

Sola smiled. “Yes it will,” she agreed.

Death Star

Anakin stood in the intensive care unit of the medical wing, arms folded over his chest as he watched the medical droid attending to the prisoners. They were both human males, and both in serious condition.

“When will I be able to talk to them?” Anakin asked the medic who was examining the datachart beside one of the patient’s bed.

“I can’t tell you that, sir,” the doctor replied. “Both of them have sustained rather serious trauma to the head, as well as some internal damage. I don’t know when they’ll be conscious, I’m afraid.”

Anakin didn’t want to hear this, and he approached the beds. As Darth Vader he would have ordered the medic to revive the prisoners, not caring what risk there was to them. But he was not Vader, not any more.

“I want you to notify me the moment they start to show signs of regaining consciousness,” Anakin told the medic finally. “Even the smallest amount, do you understand?”

“Yes sir,” the medic replied. “Will you be here on the Death Star?”

Anakin nodded. “Yes, I’ll be here until I talk to them. Just use my comlink.”

“Understood sir.”

Anakin stayed a few moments longer, trying to contact the mind of each of the prisoners. But neither were anywhere near a state of consciousness, their minds completely quiet. He frowned, and then left the medical bay.

Upon returning to his quarters, Anakin was suddenly hit with a wave of fatigue. He replicated himself a light meal and sat down to eat it. *I hate eating alone*, he thought, the thought of sleeping alone in the adjacent room even more depressing. *Padmé’s going to be even more pissed off when I tell her I have to stay here longer than I’d anticipated*, he thought grimly as he ate his meal. He checked the time on his wrist chrono, and calculated that it was very late on Coruscant. *Do I wake her up to tell her? Or wait until morning?* He wondered, knowing that in either case her reaction would be the same. Deciding he’d try to get some sleep first and contact her in the morning, Anakin stood up and entered the bedroom, hoping he’d be able to sleep without his wife in his bed.

Chapter 108

One hundred and eight

Death Star

Anakin tossed and turned in the bed, the absence of Padmé's warm body next to him making sleep impossible. Looking over at the small table beside the bed, he saw that it was barely past midnight. Deciding he needed to see his wife's face, he got out of bed and walked over to the small desk in the room. He activated the comm screen and watched impatiently as it rose up out of the desk top.

Anakin waited a few moments as the comm signal sounded, but after a few times the computer sent his signal to the message box. Frustrated that he would not be able to talk to Padmé, he was about to leave a message when Padmé finally appeared on the screen.

"Hi," she said, her hair tousled from sleep.

"Hi," he replied. "Sorry to wake you, Angel. I couldn't sleep."

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because you're not here," he replied.

"Come home then if you can't sleep," she told him, running her hands through her unruly hair.

"I can't, not tonight," he told her.

Padmé frowned. "Why not?"

"None of the prisoners can communicate yet," he told her, and then proceeded to tell her about the accident that had resulted in the injuries suffered by the spies.

"I see," she replied when he'd concluded. Disappointment filled her as she realized she wouldn't be able to tell him about the baby as soon as she'd hoped. "So... when exactly *will* you be home?" she asked.

"I can't say for sure," he replied.

"You made Luke and Leia a promise," she reminded him.

"And I intend on keeping that promise," he assured her. "No matter what."

"Good," she replied.

Anakin regarded her for a moment, sensing that there was something on her mind that she didn't want to get into. "You okay, Angel?" he asked finally.

"I'm fine," she replied, closing her mind to him as she'd learned to do many years earlier. "Just... tired."

Anakin nodded, not convinced she was being completely honest with him. "I'll let you get back to sleep, then," he said. "I love you."

"I love you too," she replied. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight Angel." Anakin waited for her to close the transmission, which she did at once. He sat for a moment, still not convinced that there wasn't something she was holding back from him. But there was so much tension between them these days then it could be simply his imagination. Standing up, Anakin stretched, and looked at the empty bed. Deciding he'd sleep no more, he decided to return to the medical bay. He got dressed, and then left the room, hoping to find a change in the condition of the prisoners.

Later that day — Coruscant detention centre

Mon Mothma checked her wrist chrono one more time as she waited for Bail Organa to be brought into the room. She was most anxious to learn of how his visit with Padmé had gone, and if indeed there had been one. Although she couldn't say it to Padmé, it was Mothma's hope that the meeting would be the first of many, and that it would pave the way towards negotiations between the Empire and the Alliance.

The door opened, and Mothma looked up to see the clone guards escorting Organa into the room. Bail seemed surprised to see her and gave her a little smile as he sat down.

"I didn't expect to see you again so soon," Bail began.

"I wanted to see if Padmé had been to see you," Mothma replied. "And if so, how it went."

Organa frowned, giving Mothma a bad feeling. "Yes, she came," he told her. "Unfortunately she didn't come alone."

"You mean..."

"Yes, Vader came with her," Organa said bitterly. "I tell you Mon, he may look like Anakin Skywalker again, but he's just as arrogant, just as power hungry as he was when he was in the suit."

"Please tell me you didn't argue with him," Mothma sighed.

Organa looked away. "I hate him, Mon," he said quietly. "And he hates me. What did you expect would happen?"

Mothma leaned closer to speak to him quietly. "I expect you to put aside your personal differences with him for the good of the galaxy," she said. "Don't you get it, Bail? He's the emperor now, and Padmé is his wife. If we can gain their trust, there's a chance that we can come to some sort of peaceful coexistence."

"Do you honestly think Vader cares about peace?" Organa asked bitterly. "You may be fooled by all his fine talk and grand plans, but I don't believe any of it. More than that, I don't trust him. I never will."

Mothma shook her head ruefully. "What is it about you men, anyway?" she asked. "Your egos are so big that they won't allow you to see the big picture?"

"It has nothing to do with ego," Organa countered.

“Of course it does,” she replied. “I know you’re hurting because of Leia, but it’s time to get over it, Bail. Move on with your life. Whether you want to acknowledge it or not, Anakin Skywalker is the key to the future. And the sooner you accept that, the better.”

With that she stood up, signaling to the guards that she wanted to leave. Bail was surprised by her sudden departure, and could only watch her leave, having been given a great deal to think about in his solitude.

Veslack Academy

The Skywalker twins’ party was all that the students could talk about at the lunch table that day. Each of the children in Luke and Leia’s class were coming, much to the envy of most of the remainder of the student body.

“It’s gonna be the *best* party ever,” Luke boasted to his friends. “Just wait until you see all the cool stuff we have planned! It’s gonna be *awesome!!*”

“My dad said that there will be clones watching us and if we do anything bad they’ll lock us up,” one boy said.

“As if,” Leia replied with a roll of her eyes. “The clones are there for our protection, not to punish our friends. Besides, we’ve asked our dad not to have them around tomorrow,” she added. “So you don’t need to worry about that.”

“Is he going to be there? Your dad?” one girl asked.

“Of course he will,” Luke replied. “This is the first time we’ve celebrated our birthday all together, all four of us. There’s no way he’d miss it.”

“My mom thinks your dad is *so* handsome,” another girl commented with a roll of her eyes. “Isn’t that gross?”

“Very gross,” Leia agreed.

Death Star

Anakin ended up spending the better part of the day in the medical bay, much to the consternation of the medical staff. They all felt rather nervous having the emperor present, watching everything they did. Anakin was tired, for he’d slept very little, but didn’t want to take time to sleep. The last thing he wanted was to miss the twins’ party, and he needed to interrogate the prisoners before he could go home. *It’s not until tomorrow*, he reminded himself; everything *will work out*.

Suddenly, amid his musings, an alarm started to sound on one of the diagnostic displays. At once medics rushed in, along with medidroids to attend to the patient who was apparently in distress.

“What’s happening?” Anakin demanded amidst the chaos.

“He’s in cardiac arrest,” one droid reported.

Coruscant

“There you are,” Sola said as she found Padmé in the large dining room.

Padmé looked up at her with a smile. “Were you lost?” she asked.

“No,” Sola answered at once. ‘Well... maybe,’ she admitted as she sat down with her sister. “What are you doing?” she asked

“Just going over the list for tomorrow,” Padmé replied, looking around the large room.

“How many kids are coming to this party?” Sola asked.

“Sixteen I believe is the final number,” Padmé replied “It ought to be quite the party,” she added.

“Yes no doubt,” Sola replied. There was something on her mind, something she wanted to ask Padmé, but felt unsure how to do so without upsetting her.

“Padmé, I don’t want to be negative,” Sola began. “But... what if Anakin doesn’t return for the party?”

Padmé frowned, not looking at her sister for a moment. “He promised us, Sola,” she said, standing up to inspect the table arrangements more closely. “I believe in his word.”

Sola nodded. “Of course you do,” she replied. “But I think you need to prepare for the possibility that he may not make it.”

“What are you trying to say, Sola?” Padmé asked finally, starting to feel exasperated. “Don’t you think I’m already anxious enough about this situation?”

“That’s exactly what I’m getting at,” Sola replied. “I’m worried about the stress you’re under, Padmé. And I’m even more worried about what another big fight between you and Anakin will do to you and this pregnancy. And you know that is what will happen if he doesn’t show up tomorrow.”

“Yes, it *would* happen,” Padmé replied, starting to grow annoyed. “But it *won’t* happen because Anakin will be here.”

“Padmé, I don’t want to upset you,” Sola replied, “but...”

“But you *are* upsetting me!” Padmé replied. “I don’t need this, Sola!”

“Padmé, all I’m saying is that you need to be free of stress now,” Sola said. “And I’m worried that if things don’t work out the way you hope, you will be under even more stress than you are now.”

Padmé said nothing for a moment, not looking at her sister. “He will be here,” she said finally. “I trust him, and I believe in him, and I know he will be here. And I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” she concluded, and walked away.

Padmé had not gone very far when Threepio approached her.

“Excuse me, Milady,” the droid said, “but you have a visitor.”

Padmé frowned, not at all in the mood for visitors. “Who is it?” she asked.

“Senator Mon Mothma,” Threepio replied. “She assured me that you’d want to talk to her.”

Padmé sighed. "Where is she?" she asked.

"Right this way, Milady," Threepio said.

Death Star

Despite their best efforts, the medical staff was not able to save the life of the prisoner who died of heart failure. Anakin watched them as they worked frantically to save him, all the while sensing that the man would not make it. And he'd been right; and was now left with a serious problem. He only had one prisoner left to interrogate, and if this one didn't know anything, then all this would have been for nothing.

"I'm sorry, sir," the head physician said to Anakin. "His injuries were simply too severe. We did everything we could."

Anakin nodded, knowing that they had. "What about him?" he asked, indicating the remaining prisoner. "Any signs of him recovering consciousness?"

"Not yet sir," the medic replied. "We'll let you know as soon as there's any sign."

"Be sure you do," Anakin replied, and left to find Tagge.

Coruscant

"What brings you all the way out here, Mon?" Padmé asked as she sat down with the senator.

"I talked to Bail earlier today," Mothma began. "And had the impression that your meeting with him did not go well."

Padmé sighed. "Look, if you're here to badger me about going to talk to him again, it's not going to happen," she stated. "He was rude and belligerent towards my husband, and I simply don't have the time for his hatefulness."

"No, I'm not here for that, Padmé," Mothma assured her. She looked down at her hands clasped in her lap, trying to summon the nerve to say what she felt compelled to say. "You see, it was my hope that Bail and Anakin could come to some sort of...settlement. But it's clear that they hate one another far too much for that to ever happen, and so..."

"Settlement?" Padmé interjected. "What are you talking about?"

Mothma looked up at her. "I think you know, Padmé," she said simply.

And then Padmé realized what she was talking about, and her mind went back eleven years to a meeting at 500 Republica. Mothma had been there, hadn't she?

"You're talking about the Rebellion," Padmé said finally. "You want Anakin and Bail to reach a cease fire."

"Yes," Mothma replied. "It was my hope, and the main reason I wanted you to talk to him. But things didn't turn out the way I'd hoped."

"No, they didn't," Padmé agreed. "It was my hope as well, actually. I've been after Anakin for weeks to talk to the Alliance. He wants peace, Mon, he really does. But I'm afraid that if it's left to Anakin and Bail, it will never happen."

"I know," Mothma replied. "That's why I'm here. I was hoping Anakin would talk to me."

"You mean... as a representative of the Rebel Alliance," Padmé asked.

Mothma nodded. "Yes," she admitted, knowing she could trust Padmé. "I want peace more than anything, Padmé, and it will never happen until both sides sit down and talk."

"You're absolutely right," Padmé replied. 'And I wish you could talk to him right now,' she added. "But he's not home, I'm afraid."

Mothma frowned. "Oh, that's disappointing," she commented. "When do you expect him?"

"Tomorrow, or perhaps later today," Padmé replied. "We're having a huge party for Luke and Leia's birthday tomorrow," she added with a smile.

Mothma smiled too. "How wonderful," she said. "Tomorrow? Isn't tomorrow Empire Day?"

"I suppose it is," Padmé replied. "At least it was. We don't plan on continuing that particular tradition."

"Thank the Maker," Mothma sighed. "Such hypocrisy to celebrate the destruction of the Republic and the creation of the dictatorship Palpatine created."

"I couldn't agree more," Padmé replied. 'I will talk to Anakin when he gets home,' she told Mothma. "And you needn't worry about any... legal ramifications, Mon. I give you my word on that."

Mothma was greatly relieved to hear this, and smiled once more. "Thank you, Padmé," she said, reaching out and putting her hand on Padmé's. "I knew I was right to come to you."

Death Star

It was several hours later when Anakin was signaled by the medical staff that their patient had begun to show signs of regaining consciousness. He'd tried to get some sleep during the interim, but his mind was far too full to allow him more than a few restive minutes here and there. Once his comlink had sounded, however, he became fully awake, and left his quarters immediately.

"His brain scans are showing signs of some cognitive awareness, sir," the medic reported. "It's not a lot, but you did say to notify you at the first sign."

"Yes, you were right to do so," Anakin said as he approached the bed. "Leave us," he said, looking down at the prisoner.

The medic knew better than to question Anakin's request, and did as he was told.

Using the Force, Anakin focused deeply on the man's unconscious mind, shutting out the sound of the machinery, the sound of the medroids moving about in the room behind him, everything that would distract him. *Who are you? Where do you come from? How did you get involved in the Rebel Alliance?* Anakin started by sifting through the man's mind for this fundamental information

It was easy enough to find, for the man's mind was completely open to Anakin's now in his unconscious state. *Who sent you to the Death Star? Who was in command of this mission?* He wasn't surprised to learn that it had in fact been Bail Organa who had been the mastermind behind the spy mission. *Who are the commanders of the Rebel Alliance? Where is the Rebel base?* This information, the most crucial, was not as forthcoming as the rest had been, and Anakin probed deeper. *Where is the Rebel base?*

The fact that the man's mind seemed unable to provide this information made Anakin think that what he'd feared for years was true. The Rebellion operated in small splinter groups, cells that operated as part of the collective, but without knowledge that could damage the Alliance as a whole. It was a smart way to operate, and yet it gave Anakin no help. And that was very frustrating.

"Anything, sir?" the medic asked as Anakin walked away from the bed.

"Not enough," Anakin replied, looking back at the patient. "Would it jeopardize his condition now if you were to give him something to revive him?" he asked.

"I'm afraid so, sir," the medic replied. "The safest thing to do in cases like this it to allow the patient to awaken on his own without medical intervention. I know that isn't what you want to hear," he commented, "but I also know that you need this man alive."

"Yes, I do," Anakin agreed.

"Then I'm afraid you'll just have to be patient, sir," the medic replied. "And let nature take its course."

Anakin nodded, realizing that the man was correct. *I hate waiting*, he reflected grimly as he left the medical bay to have something to eat, hoping his wait wouldn't be a long one.

Chapter 109

One hundred nine

Death Star

"Were you able to get any sleep, sir?" Riema asked as she sat down with Anakin in the officers' mess.

"Not much," Anakin replied. "Too much on my mind," he added, rubbing his eyes tiredly.

"You know there are meds you can take to help you sleep," Riema told him. "It might be worth your while."

"I hate meds," Anakin countered. "I had enough of them when I was in that damn suit."

Riema nodded. "Yes I'm sure," she agreed. "But you'll need a clear head when you finally get to interrogate this man. If you've had no sleep..."

'Yes, I see your point,' Anakin replied. He sighed and rubbed his eyes again. "Very well," he said. "I'll take something." He smiled. "You sound like my wife," he added.

Riema smiled. "I'll take that as a compliment, sir," she replied as she stood up. "I'll go to the medical bay now and get you something."

Anakin nodded, the mention of his wife making him miss her even more. *The party is tomorrow*, he reflected; *I can't miss it... I just can't. The twins would never forgive me... and neither would Padmé.* With these somber thoughts in mind, Anakin picked his way through his meal until Riema returned with a sleep aid.

"Sweet dreams," she said, handing him a small tablet.

Anakin looked at the tiny pill. "This is it?" he asked.

Riema nodded. "Yes, just one. The nurse told me you'd be out like a light within ten minutes."

Anakin snorted in disbelief. "We'll see about that," he replied, standing up. 'I want you to go to the medical bay,' he told her, popping the pill in his mouth. "And notify me as soon as he wakes up."

"I will sir," she replied. "Have a good rest."

Coruscant

Padmé awoke early the next morning. She turned in the bed, hoping against hope that Anakin had come home in the middle of the night; but his side of the bed was still empty, just as it had been when she'd gone to bed the night before. *Oh Anakin, don't do this to the kids*, she thought, dreading the thought of telling Luke and Leia that their father wasn't home yet. *But the party doesn't start until noon*, she reasoned, getting out of bed. *He may still make it. He **will** make it*, she vowed, determined not to give up hope just yet.

An hour later, Padmé went downstairs, where Obi-Wan was already seated eating his breakfast. He looked up and then stood up when she entered the room, ever the gentleman.

“Good morning Obi-Wan,” she said as she sat down.

Obi-Wan could see at once that she was upset. “Good morning Padmé,” he replied. “Anakin hasn’t returned, has he?”

Padmé shook her head. “No, not yet,” she said. ‘But he has three hours until the party starts,’ she added. “He’ll make it, I’m sure of it.”

“I hope so,” Obi-Wan replied. “The younglings will be sorely disappointed if he doesn’t.”

“They won’t be the only ones,” she told him.

Obi-Wan nodded, and then looked up as Luke and Leia entered the room. “Here are the birthday celebrants now,” he said, giving them a smile.

“Happy birthday,” Padmé said, standing up at once and giving each of the twins a hug.

“Thanks Mom,” Leia said as she and Luke sat down. It didn’t take a Force sensitive to see how upset both of them were.

“Dad’s not home, is he?” Luke asked.

“I’m afraid not,” Padmé replied. “Not yet, anyway.”

“He promised he’d be here, Mom,” Leia said. “He wouldn’t break a promise to us, would he?”

“Of course he wouldn’t,” Padmé replied. “He still has time. You know how busy he is now that he’s emperor.”

The twins nodded, but neither seemed to take heart from her words. Padmé frowned, hating to see her children so glum on what should be the happiest day of their lives. *This is their first birthday together, the first one they’ve celebrated with their family... he has to be here, he just has to be!*

Jacqueline and Rachelle entered the room at this point, accompanied by Threepio whom Obi-Wan had sent to make sure they didn’t get lost. Having the other children in the room helped Luke and Leia forget about their father’s absence, if only for a little while and soon the four of them were talking excitedly about the upcoming festivities.

“Good morning,” Sola said as she entered the room. She glanced around the table, and then at Padmé. “He’s not here?” she asked quietly so the twins wouldn’t hear her.

Padmé shook her head, getting tired of answering that particular question. “He will be,” she assured her sister as Sola sat down. “I know he will, Sola.”

Sola nodded as she poured herself some caff, hoping that Padmé’s faith wasn’t misplaced.

Death Star

Anakin had been sleeping for several hours when his comlink sounded. He had been in a deep sleep, thanks to the sleeping aid, and was discombobulated for a moment. And then he remembered — the Death Star.

"Skywalker here," he said, running a hair through his tousled hair.

"The prisoner is awake," Riema reported.

"I'll be right there," Anakin said, getting out of bed. He headed into the fresher for a quick shower.

A short time later

The prisoner was indeed awake, and Anakin could feel the fear emanating from him as soon as he entered the room. He walked over to the bed, keeping his eyes on the man, whose fear seemed to increase upon seeing the large, imposing looking man approaching his bedside.

"Do you know where you are?" Anakin asked.

The prisoner nodded.

"You're Tanomas Dontin," Anakin stated, "from the planet Generis. You're twenty four standard years of age and your area of expertise is cybernetics."

"How... how do you know all that?" the man asked weakly.

"Your mind is weak," Anakin told him. "And easily read. So there is really no point to you trying to lie to me, Dontin. I will know."

"I... I don't know anything," the man replied. "I'm just a computer tech," he added pathetically.

Anakin cocked an eyebrow. "Why don't I believe that?" he asked. "Now tell me what you know about the command hierarchy of the Rebel Alliance, and where they are based."

Corsucant

By a quarter of an hour past noon, the house was full of children, and the noise level had reached extreme proportions. The tables that had been set up for the twins' gifts were laden with parcels of all sizes and shapes. And yet, amidst all the festivities, there was an air of tension among the members of the family.

Luke and Leia were doing their best to keep upbeat, and being surrounded by friends certainly helped. The entertainment was well under way when Sola took Padmé aside to talk to her privately.

"Padmé, we need to talk," she said as they she closed the sliding doors of a nearby sitting room.

Padmé had known that this was coming, and simply sat down. "You were right," she said quietly. "He's not coming."

"I'm so sorry," Sola said, reaching out and taking Padmé's hand. "I really am. I can only imagine how you must be feeling."

"No, I don't think you can," Padmé replied, lowering her eyes to her hands in her lap. 'I really thought he was coming,' she said, her voice no more than a whisper. "I believed in him, Sola."

"I know you did," Sola replied. "But now that he's let you down again, you need to take action. You need to do something to protect yourself, protect your family."

Padmé looked up at her. "What are you talking about?" she asked.

"I'm talking about getting away from him," Sola said. "And away from all this stress. He's just made things worse with this latest stunt. You can't remain here, Padmé; the stress is just too much and it's only going to get worse."

Padmé looked at her sister, unsure how to respond. "You're suggesting I leave Anakin?" she asked finally. "Is *that* what you're suggesting?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm suggesting," Sola replied.

Padmé stood up, greatly agitated by what Sola was saying. "I can't believe you'd suggest such a thing," she said, walking across the room. "Leave Anakin? I love him, Sola! We were apart ten years, and now that we're together again you want me to *leave* him??"

Sola stood up and walked over to her. "Padmé, I know you love him," she said. 'But you need to think about your baby now,' she continued. "If this baby is going to have a chance, you have to get away from all this stress. I know you don't want to hear it, but right now being with Anakin is the worst thing you can do for this child."

Padmé didn't want to hear it; but if she were completely honest with herself, she'd know that Sola was right. "And Luke and Leia?" she asked, her back to Sola. 'How do I tell them that we're not going to live with their father any more? Because I won't leave them again,' she said, turning back to Sola. "If I leave, they come with me."

"Of course," Sola replied. 'I don't think they'll have trouble understanding why you're doing this, Padmé,' she said. "They're bright children, and they've had their share of disappointment recently too, not the least of which is him missing their birthday today."

Padmé nodded, a lump forming in her throat at the thought of leaving Anakin. "I don't know if I can do this, Sola," she said quietly as the tears started rolling down her face. 'I love him so much— how can I live without him?' "You did it before, and you'll do it again," Sola assured her, taking her hands. "It may not be forever, Padmé," she told her.

"Yes, that's true," Padmé agreed, holding onto that one hope. She looked at the antique clock on the mantle, seeing that the party was nearing an end. "I'll get Threepio to pack up some things for the kids," she said, resigned to her fate.

"I'll take care of that," Sola said. "You go and spend time with the twins."

Padmé nodded, and then left the room.

Death Star

Two hours spent in interrogation had yielded nothing, for Anakin knew no more than he had when the prisoner was still unconscious. It was clear that the man simply knew nothing, which frustrated Anakin no end.

"Well?" Riema asked as Anakin emerged from the medical bay.

“Nothing,” Anakin replied. “Not a damn thing. The one with all the information was killed,” he reported with a frown.

“I’m sorry,” she replied.

“Let’s just go home,” he said as they walked toward the lift. And then he stopped as a thought struck him. “Riema, what day is it?” he asked.

“It’s Empire Day, sir,” Riema replied.

“Oh no,” Anakin said as a feeling of dread filled him. “The party... it’s today!!” he declared as he raced for the lift. Riema took off after him.

Coruscant

Luke and Leia entered their parents’ bedroom, knowing that something was very wrong. When they saw their mother packing, they knew at once what was going on.

“We’re going away, aren’t we?” Luke asked.

Padmé looked up at the twins. “Yes,” she said. “Please sit down, kids.”

The twins did as she asked, waiting expectantly for her to continue.

“Why didn’t Dad come?” Leia asked. “He ruined everything!”

Padmé nodded. “I know,” she replied. ‘And that’s why we’re leaving,’ she continued as she returned to her packing. “I can’t live like this anymore,” she told them as the tears started once more. “We can’t.”

“But... Mom,” Leia said. “You love Daddy, and he loves you! We can’t just leave him because he missed our party!”

Padmé looked up at her. “It’s a little more complicated than you know,” she said. ‘You see, I’m pregnant,’ she told them, looking from one to the other. “And if I stay here, with all the tension that exists between your father and me, I’m truly afraid that I will lose this baby as I did before.”

Luke frowned. “The doctors told me that you lost the baby because it died,” he said.

“That’s right,” Padmé replied, trying not to lose her composure. “I was under too much stress, and stress can do that. And now... you both know how much we have been fighting lately. I have to get away from all this, kids. For the good of this baby, I have no choice.”

The twins nodded, both of them understanding their mother’s rationale.

“Does that mean we’re never going to see Dad again?” Leia asked, trying hard to hold back the tears.

“No honey,” Padmé said. ‘It doesn’t mean that at all,’ she assured her. “I love your father very much,” she continued, “and this is probably the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do. But I know that what I’m doing is the only thing I can do, for the good of your little brother or sister. I hope you can understand that.”

“We understand, Mom,” Luke assured her; even though neither one of them did completely. ‘We hate to see you upset this way,’ he added with a frown, his dreams finally

making sense to him. "And if going away for a while means you won't have to be so stressed, then let's do it."

Padmé looked up at her son, seeing in him the same protectiveness that Anakin had always had for his own mother. "Thank you Luke," she said, holding her arms out to them both. "I'm sorry your birthday hasn't worked out the way we hoped it would," she said, embracing them both.

"We're together Mom," Leia assured her, unable to hold back the tears any more. "That's what counts."

Padmé nodded, closing her eyes as she held her precious twins close, knowing that they would give her the strength she would need to get through this.

Sola entered the room at this point. "I asked Han to load the bags into the shuttle," she told Padmé. "He's insisting on coming with us."

Padmé looked up at her. "I'm not surprised," she replied. "Where's Obi-Wan? I need to tell him what's going on."

"I'll get him," Sola said.

"Kids, why don't you pick your favorite gifts to bring with us?" Padmé suggested.

"Does that include the swoop bikes?" Luke asked hopefully.

Padmé smiled. "I'm afraid there won't be room on the shuttle," she told him. "Sorry."

Luke sighed heavily and left the room with Leia. Padmé watched them go, fresh tears starting in her eyes. She stood up and closed her suitcases, trying to think clearly for a moment lest she forget anything.

"Taking a trip?"

Padmé looked over to the doorway to see Obi-Wan standing there.

"Yes," she said. 'Come in, Obi-Wan,' she added. "I have to talk to you."

Obi-Wan walked in, the waves of anxiety coming from Padmé hitting him immediately. "You're very upset that Anakin missed the party," he said.

"Yes, but that's only part of it," she told him. 'I'm taking the kids and going to Naboo with my sister,' she told him. "I can't live under these conditions anymore, not now."

Obi-Wan nodded. "I see," he replied, rather alarmed by her decision.

"The situation is far more complicated than you know, Obi-Wan," she continued, sensing that he was confused. "You see, I learned yesterday that I'm pregnant. And I won't jeopardize my child's life again by living amidst all this stress. I lost one child, I won't lose another."

"Yes, that does change things," Obi-Wan replied. "Does Anakin know? About the baby?"

"No, I didn't know when he left, and he didn't sense it," she told him.

Obi-Wan frowned. "That's not like him," he commented.

"No it isn't," Padmé agreed. 'I told you before that I think he's changing,' she added. "Can you see it now?"

"Yes, unfortunately," he sighed. He thought for a moment. "You're going to Naboo? Is Han coming with you?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied.

"Good," he said. "I must stay here with the girls, I promised Riema I'd care for them in her absence," he explained.

Padmé smiled. "Which was very kind of you," she commented.

"Yes, well," he replied, his cheeks reddening ever so slightly. "I also want to be here for Anakin. Despite everything I promised him I'd be his conscience. I intend to keep my promise, Padmé."

"I'm glad," she said. "He will need a friend when he gets home and finds us gone."

"Do you want me to tell him?" he asked, hoping against hope that she'd say no.

"I will leave a holo-message for him," she told him. Her eyes filled with tears. 'It's killing me to do this, Obi-Wan,' she told him softly. "I love him so much, but I really don't have a choice. You see that, don't you?"

"Yes," he replied at once. "You must do what you feel is right, of course."

Padmé smiled sadly. "Thank you Obi-Wan," she said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "You're a good friend."

Chapter 110

One hundred and ten

Coruscant several hours later

Anakin's heart pounded in his chest as he landed the shuttle behind the house. Night had fallen, and he knew that he was too late for the party. Guilt and self-recrimination filled him as he and Riema left the craft and headed into the house. Inside it was quiet, as all the occupants of the house seemed to have gone to bed.

"Is there anything I can do before I turn in, sir?" Riema asked.

"No," Anakin replied. "Go see your kids. I'm going to do the same."

"Good night then, sir," she replied, not envying him the confrontation that lay ahead.

Anakin headed upstairs, frowning as he sought out the Force signatures of Luke and Leia. Ever since they'd come into his life almost a year ago, he could tell when they were home, when they were asleep— and when they weren't. And right now he knew that they were not at home. He frowned, and raced up the stairs, two at a time. He headed for their room, and opened the door, to prove to his eyes what his heart already knew.

As he stood there staring in bewilderment at the empty beds of his children, he sought out his wife's Force signature next. She was gone too.

"What the hell is going on?" he wondered aloud as he headed down the hall towards the master bedroom. "Where did they go??"

Entering the bedroom, he looked around, no hints evident as to where his family had gone and why. *Did they go to Naboo with Sola for a vacation? But why now??*

And then his eyes fell upon a data disc on his pillow, and he realized that Padmé must have left it to tell him where they'd gone. Picking up the disc, he walked into the small antechamber and over to the computer. Feeding the disc into the reader, he sat down to watch it.

Hello Anakin, Padmé began, the hurt evident in her eyes, by the time you see this, the children and I will be on our way to Naboo. Anakin nodded at this point, not surprised at all by this. I don't need to tell you how disappointed the twins were that you missed their party. We were all disappointed, Anakin. Padmé stopped for a moment to gather herself before continuing, and Anakin began to get the feeling that there was more to this than he'd originally thought.

I can't live like this any more, Anakin, Padmé continued, her eyes filling with tears. I can't live with the tension, the constant fighting and the stress. I found out yesterday that I'm pregnant, Ani. I lost a baby once because of stress, and I won't take that risk again. Anakin sat in stunned silence as the truth began to dawn on him. She's leaving me... she's gone...

I hate that it's come to this, Padmé continued, fighting to get the words out, but I have to think about the welfare of this child. I love you, Anakin, she said softly, the tears rolling down her face by this point, but I can't be with you right now. We're simply too far apart, and I can't seem to bridge the gap. I hope you will try to understand how I'm feeling and my motivation for doing this. I will always love you, no matter what. Goodbye.

Anakin sat for a moment, his insides feeling as though they'd been turned to ice. *Why, Padmé?* he thought angrily, standing up, his fists clenched tightly. *Everything I'm doing, I'm doing for you and our family. And this is the thanks I get?? You take my children and leave me??* His mind screamed as he swiped his arm over the desk, sending the disc reader crashing to the floor.

"Anakin?"

Anakin turned around, the voice startling him. Obi-Wan stood in the doorway.

"They're gone," Anakin told him, his voice hoarse with emotion. "Padmé took the children to Naboo because I missed the party. She left me over a bloody party!!"

Obi-Wan was shocked by Anakin's arrogance, and decided it was time he spoke up.

"Is *that* what you think?" Obi-Wan asked incredulously. "That she left you over a blasted party??"

Anakin frowned. "Well? She's gone isn't she?"

Obi-Wan shook his head in disbelief. "You really don't get it, do you?" he asked.

"What? What don't I get?" Anakin demanded, growing impatient with Obi-Wan's lack of sympathy.

Obi-Wan sighed. "Sit down, Anakin," he said. "You and I need to talk."

Anakin didn't like the barely restrained disapproval he sensed from Obi-Wan, and sat down in the chair once more.

"I believe Padmé's reasons for leaving go far beyond you simply missing the twins' birthday party," Obi-Wan began. "And deep down, I think you must realize that. Padmé is not a petty person, and she's supported you in far more difficult circumstances than this."

"Yes she has," Anakin agreed. "So why has she decided to leave me because of this?"

"You know she's pregnant," Obi-Wan said.

"Yes, she told me in her message," Anakin replied.

"Isn't it curious that you didn't sense the existence of this child before she learned of it?" Obi-Wan asked.

"I wasn't here," Anakin replied. "I've been busy."

"Yes, yes you have," Obi-Wan replied. "But surely you can see why she'd be afraid of suffering another miscarriage," he added. "The two of you haven't exactly been getting on too well lately. She's been under a great deal of stress."

"I know she's been upset," Anakin told Obi-Wan. "I know she hates the Death Star, and she thinks the Rebel Alliance can be dealt with by simply talking things out. I don't agree."

Obi-Wan nodded. "I realize that you see it as simple ideological disagreement," Obi-Wan replied. "But for Padmé it is a great deal more serious. And whether or not you agree with her isn't really the point, Anakin. You have been given a second chance with this woman; a woman you attacked and whose heart you shattered, a woman who has forgiven you more than most people would forgive in a lifetime."

Anakin looked away, Obi-Wan's words hitting him hard. "I know," he said quietly.

"You weren't there when she lost that baby," Obi-Wan continued, deciding to let Anakin have it with both barrels. "I was. I saw how she suffered, how she mourned for him, all the while worrying about you. Is it any wonder she'd be terrified at the thought of going through that again?"

Anakin frowned. "No, of course not," he replied. 'I know how she suffered; we both did. It's a terrible thing to lose a child.' He looked up at Obi-Wan. "But she's gone now, taking all three of my children with her. What does she think that will do to me?"

Obi-Wan shook his head. "You are really obtuse," he said. "It's all about you, isn't it? Don't you see how you've changed? How all this power is changing you? Padmé has seen it, and so have I. She actually told me that she felt closer to you when you were still in the suit than she does now, and do you know why that is? It's because when you were still in that suit, you were appreciative of your blessings. You knew how lucky you were to have your family back, despite your past misdeeds. But now, now you don't seem to appreciate them at all. You take them for granted, Anakin. You're arrogant and you're letting the power of being emperor destroy the most wonderful thing that's ever happened to you. And that is Padmé and the twins coming back into your life."

Anakin's immediate reaction was to dispute what Obi-Wan had said, for his ego was taking a beating, and he didn't like it. But, upon closer reflection, he had to admit that he was absolutely right.

"You're right," he said finally, looking back up at him. "I ruined things with her before, and now I'm doing it all over again," he said with a frown.

"Not ruining," Obi-Wan said, 'not yet at least,' he added with a smile. "Padmé loves you, Anakin. But sometimes I have to wonder if you deserve her."

Anakin frowned. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me," Obi-Wan replied. "After what you've put her through you should be on your knees every day thanking her for even wanting anything to do with you," he said.

Anakin lowered his eyes again, Obi-Wan's words hitting a little too close to home simply because they were dead on accurate. "I don't deserve her," he said at last. "I'm not sure if I ever have."

Obi-Wan was pleased to see Anakin's humility, and it confirmed his belief that the darkness was gone from him. "You need to tell her that, not me," he pointed out.

Anakin nodded. "I know," he said. 'But she's gone now,' he reminded Obi-Wan, looking at him once more. "How do I get her back? Will she be willing to give me yet another chance?"

"If you can prove to her that you're sincere," Obi-Wan replied, "then yes, I'd say so. She was very torn about leaving, Anakin; she felt that she had no choice."

"I gave her none," Anakin reflected with a frown. He pondered for a moment. 'I need to see her,' he said, standing up. "I'm going to Naboo."

"I know you want to see her, but perhaps you ought to let her have some space," Obi-Wan suggested. "Just for a day or two."

"A day or two is an awfully long time," Anakin replied.

Obi-Wan smiled. "You never were a patient man, my friend," he commented. "Perhaps you ought to try and get some sleep, Anakin. You've had a rather eventful few days."

Anakin nodded. "Thanks Obi-Wan," he said. "Thanks for not giving up on me."

"I did that once," Obi-Wan replied. "And I won't make that mistake again, my friend. Goodnight."

"Goodnight," Anakin replied. He waited until Obi-Wan had left the room and then walked in to the bedroom, fatigue and emotional angst filling him. Sitting down on the edge of the bed he ran his hands into his hair, wondering how he would ever get out of the mess he'd made.

Naboo

It was close to dawn by the time Padmé, Han, Sola and the twins arrived at Sola's home. Luke and Leia were more than happy to go to bed, and were asleep in a matter of moments.

"Thank you for putting us up," Padmé said as she, Han and Sola sat down at the dining room table.

"It's no trouble at all," Sola assured her. "With the girls away at school, there's plenty of room. I don't know about you two, but I'm exhausted," she said with a smile.

"I'm pretty beat myself," Han admitted.

"Let me show you to your room, Han," Sola said, standing up. "Follow me."

Padmé remained at the table, sipping at the tea Sola had made for her. It seemed surreal to be here on Naboo again, without Anakin. She didn't want to think about it for too long, however, for she knew that the control she had on her emotions was tenuous at best.

"You okay?"

Padmé looked up to see Sola standing nearby. "Just tired," she said.

Sola nodded. "Come on," she said. "Let's try to get some sleep."

"Good idea," Padmé agreed, standing up. "I just hope I can sleep without Anakin."

Coruscant

I awake in pain, just as I have for the past ten years. Opening my eyes, the light of the pod assaults my eyes, which are still very sensitive to light. But wait... what am I doing here? Why am I in this pod? I lift my hands to my face, afraid to see what I will find. My hands are gloved... I rip them off and find prosthetics... how can this be? I had surgery, didn't I??

"Lord Vader, may I speak with you?"

I hear a voice outside the pod, and I activate the pod to open it, but before it does I hear a sound from above, and I realize what it is... the mask... slowly it is lowered to my head, and within seconds I am imprisoned by it. Darkness surrounds me as the nightmarish sound of my own breathing fills the pod. The top hemisphere of the pod lifts away, revealing the officer who has been waiting for me. I can feel the fear emanating from him; he is terrified of me, terrified that he will say the wrong thing and I will kill him where he stands.

"What is it, Ozzel?" I ask.

"The emperor is on board, sir," he tells me. "He has been waiting for nearly an hour."

I stand up, the confusion filling me. "The emperor? The emperor is dead!" I tell him angrily.

Ozzel's eyes widen in shock. "My lord... I... I just saw him! I assure you he's not dead!" I step out of the pod, remembering seeing the body of the man before me embedded in the bulkhead. "You're dead too," I tell him. 'I remember killing you in this very room.' Ozzel begins to back peddle and I can see in his mind that he thinks I'm mad. "My lord, are you well?" he asks. "Perhaps you need more rest... perhaps..."

"Where is my wife?" I ask him suddenly. "Where are my children?"

"Sir, perhaps you ought to talk to the emperor," Ozzel replies. "I'm sure he can answer all of your questions far better than I can."

I let him leave, and then walk out of the room, pain jarring me with almost every step. I find myself in an audience chamber, a throne at the far end.

"Lord Vader," he snaps, the anger rippling out of him in waves. 'Do you know how long I've been waiting here?'

"No, I don't know..." I begin, determined not to be intimidated. "What do you want?"

"What do I want?? WHAT DO I WANT??" he screeches, and then lifts his hands to send a bolt of energy at me. The pain engulfs me, and I drop to my knees. 'You insolent wretch,' he snarls. "You dare to speak to me in such a manner after all I've done for you?"

I gasp for air, the pain crippling me. "No... you're dead... I killed you... you...you took Padmé from me, Padmé and our baby..."

The fiend actually smiles at this point. "Dreaming again, Lord Vader?? Dreaming of that slut you married?? Your memory is rather faulty, Lord Vader. You killed her, remember?? You struck her down in anger, her and your unborn children."

No... that's not true... they are alive, I found them, Padmé came back to me... Luke and Leia are living with us... he's lying... he's lying!!

"No, they're not dead... you're lying!" I shout.

“I’m not lying,” he replies. ‘Ten years ago to the day you killed them, and I can prove it,’ he says, activating a holopad. An image of Padmé appears. She’s on Mustafar, and her hands are around her throat as she gasps for air. “Ani, no, please!” she pleads. And then she falls to the ground.

“You see, my friend, she is dead,” Palpatine says with a smile. “Along with your precious twins...”

Anakin awoke at this point, the sound of his own voice shaking him from his sleep. He sat up in the bed, his body bathed in sweat, his hands trembling as he ran them into his hair. *It was just a dream... it was just a dream!!* He told himself, the relief filling him. Reliving the nightmarish existence he’d endured for ten years was bad enough; but to have dreamed that past year never happened was far worse. Thinking that Padmé and the twins were out of his life was horrifying beyond words, and it made his current situation that much more real to him. *I’ve lost them again;* he told himself, self-recrimination filling him. *How could I do this? I promised her I’d never hurt her again... and yet I have... I’ve hurt them all...* dropping his face into his hands, Anakin finally gave in to the emotional turmoil he was going through, and wept.

Chapter 111

One hundred eleven

Naboo

Padmé awoke several hours later, a feeling of nausea shaking her from her sleep. *Here we go*, she thought as she hurried into the fresher. She remembered how ill she'd been with Luke and Leia, and how her worry for Anakin had only exacerbated her nausea. No doubt the current situation she found herself in would do the same.

Sola was up and preparing a meal when Padmé entered the kitchen a little while later.

"Hi," she said. "Did you sleep?"

Padmé nodded. "A little," she replied.

Sola frowned. "You look awful," she said.

"Thanks," Padmé said. "Morning sickness."

"Already?" Sola asked. "It's pretty early still."

"It was this early with the twins," Padmé reported.

"Interesting," Sola said, returning to her task.

"What do you mean?" Padmé asked.

"Maybe you're having twins again," Sola said, turning to her with a smile.

Padmé's eyes widened. "Twins? Again??"

Sola laughed. "I'm just teasing you," she said. "You should eat something," she continued. "It always helped me to have something in my stomach."

Padmé nodded. "Yes, me too," she replied. "Are the twins still sleeping?"

Sola nodded. "Han was up when I got up," she reported. "Said he needed to contact Anakin."

Padmé frowned. "Yes, I suppose he'd feel compelled to do so, since technically Anakin is his boss."

"Yes I suppose so," Sola agreed, coming over and setting down a plate of sandwiches on the table. "Eat," she said, "you'll feel better."

Padmé sighed. "I'll try," she replied, picking up a sandwich and forcing herself to take a bite.

Sola smiled. "I'll make some tea," she said, turning away once more.

Coruscant

"You look awful," Obi-Wan remarked as Anakin joined him, Riema and her daughters at the breakfast table.

"Thanks," Anakin replied. "I slept like sh... like garbage," he said, remembering the children at the table.

"Sorry to hear that," Obi-Wan replied. 'Han Solo contacted you a short time ago,' he reported. "He's with Padmé and the twins on Naboo."

Anakin was surprised to hear this. "Good," he replied. "I'm glad she took him with her. At least I'll be able to have some contact with her," he added.

"If there's anything I can do, sir," Riema spoke up, "please let me know."

"I will, thank you," Anakin replied. "To be honest, I'm not sure what to do at this point," he admitted.

"Padmé wanted me to tell you that Senator Mothma came here yesterday," Obi-Wan remembered. "And that she wants to talk to you."

"That will have to wait," Anakin replied. "I have other things on my mind right now besides the Senate."

"It wasn't about the Senate that she wished to talk to you," Obi-Wan replied. "It was about the Rebel Alliance."

Anakin's eyes widened at this. "The Rebel Alliance?? You mean..." he stopped as he realized what this meant. *She's the contact I've been looking for...* He looked up at Riema. "Contact her office and tell her to expect me this morning," he said.

"Right away sir," Riema replied, standing up, happy to be useful.

"You also should know that Padmé promised the Senator political immunity," Obi-Wan told Anakin.

Anakin nodded. "Don't worry," he replied. 'I won't mess this up,' he told Obi-Wan with a wry smile. He rubbed a hand over his chin, noting that he needed a shave. "I guess I'd better get tidied up if I'm going to the Senate," he remarked, standing up.

"Good luck," Obi-Wan said as Anakin left the room.

Riema returned to the room shortly after and sat down with Obi-Wan. "I feel terrible," she said. "I should have reminded him about the party, Obi-Wan. I shouldn't have let him miss it."

Obi-Wan smiled at her. "Riema, don't chastise yourself," he told her. "Anakin needs to be accountable for his own actions. He knew when the party was. He can't blame anyone but himself for missing it."

Riema sighed. "I just wish it hadn't come to this," she said.

"Yes, so do I," Obi-Wan replied. "But there's one thing I know about Anakin and Padmé; they are made for one another. They have been through hell fire to be together, and they will get through this. Anakin is simply too stubborn to accept anything less," he concluded with a smile.

Riema smiled. "They're lucky to have such a good friend," she told him.

Obi-Wan felt his face grow warm. "Well, I owe them both a great deal," he said. "I will do what I can now to help."

"Where did Luke and Leia go, Mommy?" Jacqueline asked.

Riema looked at her younger daughter, trying to decide how to answer the child's question.

"They are visiting with their Aunt Sola on Naboo, little one," Obi-Wan spoke up. "Have you ever heard of it?"

"I have," Rachelle spoke up. "Luke and Leia told me about it."

"It is one of the most beautiful places in the galaxy," Obi-Wan told the girls, "with many waterfalls, and lakes, beautiful mountains and large forests. Can you see why they'd want to go there?" he asked them with a gentle smile.

"Yeah, I sure can," Rachelle said. "I'd like to go there too."

"Me too," sighed Jacqueline.

Riema and Obi-Wan exchanged a smile.

Imperial Senate

Mon Mothma sat nervously in her office, waiting for the emperor to arrive. *Is he here to apprehend me?* She wondered anxiously; *or is he here to talk?* Standing up from her desk, she walked over to the small window and looked out at the city. *Hurry up, she thought, let's just get this over with.*

"Good morning Senator."

Mothma started at the sound of the deep voice, and turned around to see Anakin standing in the doorway. She smiled nervously.

"Good morning," she replied. "Please come in. Your assistant told me that you wanted to speak with me."

Anakin nodded as he sat down in the chair in front of her desk. "Yes I do," he said as she sat down too.

Mothma clasped her hands on top of her desk, doing her best to hide how nervous she was. "What can I do for you?" she asked.

Anakin was puzzled for a moment. "Padmé told me that you wanted to talk to me," he said to her. "Was she mistaken?" he asked with a smile.

Mothma shook her head. "No, not at all," she replied. "I did want to talk to you."

Anakin nodded. "About the Rebel Alliance," he offered.

"Uh... yes," she replied. "About the Rebel Alliance," she admitted.

"I'm glad you came to her," he said.

"Oh?"

"I've wanted to talk to someone in the Alliance," he told her. "I want to start negotiations,

Senator. I want to put an end to the chaos the galaxy has been in for ten years now. I want peace.”

Mothma stared at him for a moment; half believing that she was dreaming. But this was no dream; this was the supreme galactic emperor sitting across from her, the same man who had terrorized the galaxy for a decade, the same man who had persecuted the Rebel Alliance mercilessly. But he was also the man who had been the greatest hero of the Clone Wars — the Hero with No Fear, and the greatest Jedi Knight ever to be born. Up until now Mothma had wondered who he truly was, Vader or Skywalker; but she now felt certain that she knew.

“I’m glad to hear it, Emperor Skywalker,” she told him finally. “So do we.”

Naboo

Luke and Leia were both rather quiet as they ate dinner with their mother, aunt and bodyguard that evening. They were both confused by all that was happening, and uneasy about the changes in their lives. They didn’t completely understand why their parents were estranged; but guilt had started to creep into the hearts of each of them. Had it been because of their birthday party that things had fallen apart? If they hadn’t made such a big fuss about it, would things be okay now? Neither twin knew the answer; all they knew was that they missed their father terribly, and they had never seen their mother so sad.

The twins’ melancholy did not go unnoticed by their mother, who wasn’t sure what she could do to alleviate it.

“I was thinking we could spend some time up at the lake once the girls are finished their exams next week,” Sola said, seeing how despondent her nephew and niece were. “Your Uncle Darred will be home by then too, and I know how much he’s looking forward to seeing you all.”

Padmé looked at her sister with a smile, appreciating Sola’s attempts to make Luke and Leia feel better. And yet, the thought of going to the lake retreat now, without Anakin, did not sit easily with her.

“Are we gonna go to school here, Mom?” Luke asked.

“I really hadn’t thought about it,” Padmé admitted. ‘You only have a few weeks to go before your break,’ she remembered. “I don’t know if it makes sense to enroll you in a new school at this point.”

“I can arrange for the distance learning like I did before,” Han offered.

“Yes, let’s do that,” Padmé said, grateful for Han’s suggestion. “Thank you Han.”

“No problem, Milady,” he replied. “Glad to help.”

“Does Daddy know we’re here?” Leia asked, quite out of the blue.

“Yes he does,” Padmé informed her.

“Will he come and see us?” Luke asked hopefully.

Padmé and Sola exchanged a look of uncertainty.

“I don’t know, Luke,” Padmé replied. “I can’t say for sure.”

"Of course he will," Han spoke up. "He's nuts about you guys. I'm sure he'll come see you."

Luke and Leia looked at one another across the table, each of them trying hard to keep their emotions in check, but both of them wanting to ask their mother the question that was burning in their minds.

"Mom, is this our fault?" Leia asked finally. "Is it because we wanted that stupid party that this is happening?"

"Oh Leia, no, no!" Padmé assured her at once. 'Don't ever think that this is your fault,' she said, looking from Leia to Luke. "This is between your father and me. I don't want you to ever think you are in any way responsible for this, do you understand?"

The twins nodded, neither of them able to speak for a moment because of the lump in their throats.

"May we be excused?" Luke asked quietly. "I don't think either of us is hungry," he added. Leia shook her head in agreement.

Padmé nodded, her own eyes filling with tears as she saw how upset the twins were.

"It will be okay, Padmé," Sola assured her, putting a hand on her sister's. "This is temporary, remember?"

Padmé nodded. "I hope so, Sola," she replied quietly. "For all our sakes, I really hope so."

Coruscant

Anakin arrived home feeling more optimistic than he had in the past twenty-four hours. He and Mon Mothma had agreed to come up with a list of grievances and terms, which they would draw up with their colleagues, and then meet again in a week's time to discuss them. The fact that he was finally doing something about bringing peace back to the galaxy gave Anakin a good feeling, and made him hopeful for the future; not only the future of the galaxy, but his own immediate future as well. *This is what Padme wanted all along*, he thought as he entered the house. *Only I was too pig-headed and stupid to do it.*

"How did your meeting go, sir?" Riema asked as she met him in the foyer.

"Very well," Anakin replied as he handed her his cloak. 'I'm going to need you to do some things for me, Riema,' he said. "First of all, I want you to contact the admirals and other senior officers of the fleet," he told her. "I want them here in twenty-four hours for a meeting."

"Right away sir," she said, "anything else?"

Anakin thought for a moment. "yes," he said. 'I want expenditure reports from every system in forty-eight hours,' he told her. "Contact the remaining governors and tell them. I think it's time to examine the books."

Riema nodded. "Very good sir," she said. "Is that all?"

"For now," Anakin replied. 'I'm tired,' he said. "Tell Threepio to bring me my dinner in my room," he said. "I have a lot of work to do."

"I will sir," she said, watching him ascend the staircase.

The sight of the large bed in his bedroom was still an unsettling one for Anakin, but he resolved that he would get past this. *I will get them back*, he vowed as he sat down at his computer. It wasn't long before he found himself growing drowsy, for too many nights of too little sleep was taking its toll on him. Rubbing his eyes, he decided to lie down; telling himself it was just for a few minutes to clear his head. He kicked off his boots and lay on the bed, his arm resting over his eyes.

As he felt himself drifting off, Anakin felt a strong surge of emotion coming to him through the Force. He focused on it to derive its source, and discovered that it was coming from Luke and Leia. *They're upset*, he told himself, *very upset*. Focusing on their Force signatures, Anakin drew his mind closer to theirs, the warmth and purity of their auras bringing tears to his eyes.

Luke? Leia? Can you hear me?

The twins weren't trained enough yet to respond, and yet he sensed that they could hear him.

I miss you both so much, he told them as the tears rolled down his face. *I'm so sorry I missed your party. I never meant to hurt you.*

Anakin waited for a moment to see if they would attempt to respond, but they were unable to; and yet he was certain that he felt a subtle change in their auras, as though they were somehow comforted by his presence and his words.

We'll be together soon, little ones, he told them. *I love you both so very much.*

Naboo

Luke and Leia rolled over and looked at one another across the room.

"You felt that too, didn't you?" Luke asked.

Leia nodded with a smile. "Daddy," she said.

Luke nodded. "I miss him," he said softly.

"So do I," Leia sighed. 'But he's coming to see us, Luke,' she reminded him. "I just know it."

Luke smiled. "Yeah, me too," he agreed. He closed his eyes again, and soon they were both asleep.

Chapter 112

One hundred twelve

Naboo

"I made an appointment for you to see my doctor today," Sola told Padmé at breakfast the next morning. "I know you'll love her, she's wonderful."

Padmé nodded, wishing she could get enthusiastic about her first prenatal visit.

"Can I come with you, Mom?" Leia asked.

"I suppose so," Padmé replied. "You'll have to get caught up on your school work when you get back," she added.

"Oh we're not doing much work right now," Luke informed her. "With only two weeks left before the break, our teachers are going easy on us."

"We're going to miss the big party at the end of the year," Leia realized, looking at Luke. "Everyone says it's the best party they've ever been to!"

Luke frowned, and then returned his attention to his breakfast, not wanting to voice his disappointment in front of his mother.

"Perhaps we can make some arrangements for you to go to it," Padmé said.

Luke and Leia looked at her with an expression of hope on their faces. "Really? Do you mean it?" Leia asked.

Padmé nodded. "I'd hate for you to miss that," she said. "And there's no reason you should," she added.

"Thanks Mom," Luke said with a smile. "You're the best."

Padmé smiled, happy to have been able to lift their spirits even a little.

Coruscant

Although Obi-Wan enjoyed having dinner alone with Riema and her children, he nonetheless was concerned about Anakin. So as soon as Riema excused herself with her girls, he set out to look for him.

Anakin was in the large formal dining room admiring the twins' swoop bikes when Obi-Wan found him.

"Quite the vehicles," Obi-Wan said.

Anakin looked up. "Yes," he agreed. 'All the latest features,' he told Obi-Wan, looking back at the bikes. "Pity they didn't get to try them out even once," he said.

"They will," Obi-Wan replied. "Surely you know this isn't forever. Padmé loves you far too much for it to be otherwise."

Anakin shrugged, reminding Obi-Wan of Luke in the gesture. "I don't know," he said, running a hand over the sleek bike. "Love isn't always enough," he said.

Obi-Wan looked at him for a moment, sensing Anakin's great sense of guilt and remorse over what had happened. *Good*, he thought, *this is just what he needed to get him out of his complacent arrogance*. "I have an idea," he said. "What would you say to some saber practice?" he asked. "I know I could use the exercise."

Anakin considered for a moment and then nodded. "Yes, so could I come to think of it," he said, walking over to Obi-Wan. "Are you sure you're up to this?" he asked, a hint of a smile. "You're not as young as you used to be, after all."

Obi-Wan smiled. "Neither are you," he replied.

Anakin actually laughed a little at this. "Touché," he replied. "Come on old man," he said. "Let's go before you lose your nerve."

Obi-Wan lifted an eyebrow. "As if *that* would ever happen," he muttered indignantly.

"Shall we use the practice sabers?" Obi-Wan suggested when they arrived in the gymnasium. "I'd hate for one of us to get injured," he smirked.

Anakin shook his head. "I'll go easy on you, don't worry," he said.

Obi-Wan laughed. "You're too kind," he replied as they both removed their cloaks. Anakin tossed him a practice saber. "Ready?"

"Absolutely," Anakin replied, standing ready.

The two Jedi battled vigorously for close to an hour before Obi-Wan finally started to look as though he was tiring out.

"Had enough?" Anakin asked, taking a moment to wipe the sweat from his brow.

"As much as I hate to admit it, I'm afraid so," Obi-Wan replied.

Anakin laughed. "See? Told you you're not as young as you used to be."

"Yes, thank you for that reminder," Obi-Wan replied, sitting down on one of the benches around the edge of the gymnasium. Anakin came and sat down beside him.

"That felt good," Anakin said.

"Yes," Obi-Wan replied. "Before long you'll be able to spar with Luke and Leia," he told Anakin. "They're quite skilled with the saber already."

Anakin nodded, thoughts of his beloved twins making him melancholy. "I appreciate you working with them, Obi-Wan," he said. "I really should be making their first sabers with them," he added, getting up and walking across the room.

"You will," Obi-Wan assured him. "Building a lightsaber is a long process, as you recall."

"Yes I know," Anakin agreed.

“And since they’re your younglings, no doubt they will have to make several over the course of their apprenticeship,” Obi-Wan added with a smile.

Anakin turned back to him. “Yes, no doubt,” he agreed with a smile. He ran a hand through his sweaty hair. ‘I’ve waited long enough,’ he said. “I’m going to Naboo.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “You’ve shown remarkable restraint,” he remarked. “Have a good trip.”

Anakin smiled. “I will thanks.” He started on his way and then stopped and turned back. “Try to behave yourself while you’re here alone with Riema,” he said with a hint of a smile.

Obi-Wan was far too shocked to reply, and simply and watched as Anakin left the room.

Naboo

Padmé sat in the waiting room with her Leia and her sister, doing her best to be patient. The appointment had been for 1400, but it was closer to 1500 by now, and her patience was wearing thin.

“Does she always keep you waiting this long?” Padmé asked in annoyance.

“She’s very busy, what can I say?” Sola replied.

“Maybe you should have told her your real name,” Leia said with a smile. “That would have got you in faster.”

Padmé frowned. “No, I’d rather be anonymous,” she replied.

Finally the receptionist called for her, and the three stood up together to go into the examination room.

Luke had remained back at Sola’s home with Han, not wanting to be anywhere near doctors, nurses or ‘womanly issues’ as Han had described it to him. He was trying to work on his homework, and found it hard to concentrate.

“How’s it going, kid?” Han asked as he entered the kitchen where Luke was sitting at the table.

“It’s not,” Luke said, pushing his data pad aside.

Han pulled out a chair and sat across from Luke. “You miss your dad,” he stated.

Luke nodded. “I don’t get it, Han,” he said. “If my parents love each other so much, how come my mom doesn’t want to be with my dad anymore?” he asked.

Han sighed. “It’s kind of complicated, Luke,” he replied. ‘Just because two people love one another doesn’t mean they can’t have problems too. But I don’t think you need to worry about this lasting too long,’ he added. “Your parents have been through a lot from what I know. I think they’ll get through this too.”

“I hope so,” Luke replied. “Are your parents still married?” he asked.

Han shrugged. “I don’t know, kid,” he replied. “I haven’t seen my parents since I was about your age.”

Luke’s eyes widened in shock. “Really?? Did they die?”

“No, I left home when I was fifteen,” Han replied. “Not all parents are as good as yours are, Luke.”

Luke felt awkward at having brought it up, and looked away. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

“Don’t be,” Han replied. “Not your fault, kid. Besides, I think I turned out okay,” he added with a smile.

Luke looked up at him. “Okay? Yeah, you’re like one of the coolest old people I know,” he said.

“Old people??” Han replied in shock. “*Old people??*”

Luke smirked at Han’s response. “Yeah, well you’re twenty, right? That’s pretty old.”

Han shook his head. “Lucky for you you’re the emperor’s kid,” he teased, standing up and tousling Luke’s hair. “Now get to work before I rat you out to your Mom for slacking off.”

Luke smiled as he returned his attention to his math homework, deciding that Han Solo was, after his father, the coolest man in the galaxy.

Elsewhere in Theed

“You’re in very good health,” the physician reported as she concluded her examination of Padmé as she helped her sit up. “However, I’m a little concerned about your blood pressure,” she added.

Padmé looked up at her with a frown. “Oh? Why is that? What’s wrong?”

“It’s a little high,” the doctor reported. ‘One thirty six over seventy six,’ she continued. “Now that’s not alarmingly high, but it’s something I’d like to monitor.”

Padmé nodded. “It won’t harm my baby, will it?” she asked anxiously.

“Not if it’s kept under control,” the doctor assured her. ‘And the best way to do that is to have your medidroid monitor it daily,’ she continued. “And do your best to avoid stress.”

Padmé sighed. *Yes, that will be easy*, she reflected. “Thank you,” she said. “And thank you for taking me on such short notice. I appreciate it.”

“You’re most welcome,” the doctor replied. “Will I see you in a month?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Padmé replied. “But let’s make an appointment just in case.”

The doctor nodded. “Good idea. I’ll let you get changed,” she said. “I’m sure your sister and daughter are anxious to see you.”

Sola’s home

“I wish I had my new swoop bike,” Luke said as he and Han kicked a ball around in the driveway of the large home.

“You’ll get to ride it soon enough,” Han assured him.

“I hope so,” Luke replied. ‘I’ve only wanted one all my life,’ he said, giving the ball a good kick in Han’s direction. “Did you know my Dad used to compete in pod races when he was a kid? *Pod races!*”

Han smiled. "Yeah, I remember hearing that about him," he replied. "He's pretty cool," he added.

"The coolest," Luke said. He was about to kick the ball back to Han when he stopped, sensing something. He looked back at the house, and then ran inside; leaving Han wondering what was going on.

"Dad!!!" Luke cried upon entering the house.

Anakin, who stood in the foyer, turned around with a smile, opening his arms out to his son who ran to him at once.

"I missed you so much!" Luke said as Anakin swept him into a huge hug.

"I missed you too," Anakin said, holding his son close. "So much!"

Anakin set Luke down as Han entered the house.

"It's good to see you sir," Han said.

Anakin nodded. "Thanks for accompanying my family," he told him. "I'm glad you're here, Han."

Han was taken aback by Anakin's praise, and thought he saw a change in his commanding officer since he'd last seen him. "Just doing my job sir," he replied with a smile.

"Where are Padmé and Leia?" Anakin asked.

"Aunt Sola took Mom to the doctor," Luke informed him.

Anakin looked back at his son. "Is she okay?" he asked anxiously.

"It was just for a routine check up from my understanding," Han told him.

Anakin nodded. "Yes of course," he said.

"Come in, Dad," Luke said, taking Anakin by the hand and pulling him towards the large sitting room. "You're staying for a visit, right?"

"Yes," Anakin replied as they sat down in the parlor. "As long as your mother is okay with that," he added.

"She misses you as much as me and Leia do," Luke told his father. "I know she'll be happy to see you."

Anakin smiled. "I hope so, son," he replied. "I've missed her terribly."

The front door opened, and within moments Leia came running into the room, having sensed her father's presence just as Luke had.

"Daddy!!" she cried, throwing her arms around him tightly. "I *knew* you'd come!!"

Anakin hugged his daughter tightly. "Of course I came," he told her. "I couldn't stand to be away from you any longer." He looked up as he sensed Padmé nearby. Releasing Leia he stood up and walked over to the doorway where Padmé stood, the expression on her face inscrutable.

“Hello Angel,” he said. “I’ve missed you.”

Chapter 113

One hundred thirteen

"Anakin, what are you doing here?" Sola asked, coming up behind Padmé before she had a chance to reply.

Anakin looked at her, trying his best not to lash out at her, for he highly suspected that she was the one who had given Padmé the idea of leaving him. "I came to see my family," he told her, looking back at Padmé. "I miss them."

"You didn't seem to miss them when you were on the Death Star," Sola countered.

Anakin looked back at her, a frown forming on his brow. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me," Sola replied.

"Please," Padmé spoke up finally. 'Please stop this,' she said, turning to her sister. "Anakin has every right to see his children," she said. She looked back at him. "I'm not going to deny him that right."

"Padmé, the doctor told you to avoid stress," Sola reminded her. "Don't you think him being here..."

'Yes she did,' Padmé spoke up, interrupting her. "So please stop this."

Sola said no more, but gave Anakin a withering look before leaving the room.

"Why don't we sit down," Padmé suggested.

Anakin nodded, grateful for Padmé's defense of him. "Tell me what the doctor said," he said when they sat down.

"She said everything is fine," Padmé reported. "But my blood pressure is higher than it should be," she added.

Anakin lowered his eyes, guilt filling him as he realized the toll his thoughtless was taking on her. "I'm sorry," he said quietly.

Padmé wasn't emotionally ready for this, and looked over at the twins. "You must be anxious to spend some time with your father," she said to the twins. "I'll give you some time alone," she added, standing up. Anakin grabbed her hand, preventing her from leaving.

"Please stay," he pleaded, looking up at her, his eyes full of remorse.

Padmé felt the tears rise to her eyes. "I can't," she told him softly. "I...I just can't," she said, pulling her hand from his and leaving the room.

Anakin watched her go, fighting the tears that threatened to rise to the surface. He turned back to Luke and Leia, forcing himself to smile. "So tell me all about your birthday party," he said. "And all the gifts you got."

Sola followed Padmé upstairs and into the bedroom, wanting to talk to her alone.

“Padmé, I’m sorry if I’ve upset you,” Sola began. “I’m just trying to protect you.”

“I know,” Padmé replied, sitting down on the edge of the bed. ‘But at some point I will have to talk to him,’ she said. “He is my husband, and I love him. And Luke and Leia love him. I don’t need this situation becoming any more difficult than it already is.”

Sola nodded. “Okay, I’ll back off,” she replied. “And keep my opinion to myself,” she added.

“Thank you,” Padmé replied. “I would really appreciate that.”

“I suppose I ought to ask him to stay to dinner,” Sola mused aloud. “If you’re okay with that,” she added.

“Yes, I’m okay with that,” Padmé replied. ‘The twins are so happy to see him,’ she added. “I can’t send him away after such a short visit.”

“No, I suppose not,” Sola sighed. “Very well, I’ll extend the invitation.”

“Thank you Sola,” Padmé said, standing up. “For everything,” she added, putting her arms around her sister.

Later that evening

Anakin had been surprised by Sola’s invitation, particularly after the way she had attacked him earlier. But he was only too happy to accept it, since it meant more time with Padmé and the twins. He’d decided that the best approach with his wife was not to push her. Padmé had never been a woman who could be influenced easily, and he knew her well enough to know that nothing he could say at this point would persuade her to come back home with him. Besides, he didn’t want to put more stress on her. He was alarmed to hear that her blood pressure was elevated, and worried about the baby. The last thing she needed right now was him putting more pressure on her by trying to talk her into doing something she wasn’t ready to do. No, the best way to show her that he’d learned his lesson was through actions, not words. And he planned to make those actions count.

Neither Padmé nor Anakin needn’t have worried about awkward dinner conversation, for Luke and Leia held the floor admirably. They both sensed the tremendous tension between their parents, and instinctively kept the conversation light and lively in order to alleviate it as much as possible. Just having their parents sitting at the same table sharing a meal together again meant the world to both Luke and Leia, and they were determined to interpret this as a positive sign.

“Aunt Sola said we might go up to the lake retreat,” Leia told her father. ‘You should come too, Daddy. You know how much you love it up there.’

“And bring Obi-Wan so he can go swimming again,” Luke added with a grin.

Anakin smiled. “I was just telling Jacqueline and Rachele how beautiful it is here,” he told them. ‘They want to come see for themselves. They miss you two. Everyone misses you,’ he added. “All of you,” he concluded, looking at Padmé.

Padmé looked away, uneasy with the way he was looking at her, a look she knew all too well.

Sola could see how uncomfortable Padmé was, and was starting to think she'd made a mistake inviting him to dinner. But before she could give it another thought, Luke made things much more complicated.

"Are you gonna stay over night, Dad?" the boy asked. "It's almost bedtime now," he added for good measure.

"Yes, please stay," Leia insisted, taking her father's hand. "Can he stay, Mom? Please?" she asked, looking at Padmé with the same pleading expression as her brother was.

Padmé looked at Anakin, who seemed quite uncomfortable at the twins' suggestion, and then at Sola. "It's up to your aunt," she said finally. "This is her home after all."

Thanks a lot, Padmé, Sola thought to herself. "Anakin if you would like to spend the night, you're welcome to do so," she said finally.

"Thank you, Sola," Anakin replied. 'But I won't stay if it makes Padmé uneasy,' he said, looking back at Padmé. "I will abide by her wishes."

All eyes turned to Padmé once more, who was looking at Anakin with surprise. This was not the same man who had decided she was moving into his apartment simply by having her things brought over, the man who would not take no for an answer. Clearly he'd had some time to think about his actions, for he seemed humbler to Padmé than he had in a long time.

"I don't mind if you stay," Padmé said finally, knowing it would break Luke and Leia's heart if she turned him away at this point. "It's very late, after all," she added for good measure.

Anakin smiled, heartened by her acceptance of him. "Thank you," he said.

Once again Padmé was unable to hold his gaze, and looked away, wondering if this was a big mistake letting him stay.

"I'll sleep on the couch if space is tight," Anakin offered, deciding to diffuse what could be a tense situation.

"No, I'll take the couch, sir," Han spoke up, feeling somewhat uneasy at being present for the awkward discussion. "You can take my room upstairs."

Luke and Leia both wondered why their father didn't just sleep in their mother's bed, as he did back home. But neither felt it would be prudent to make that suggestion just now.

Later that night

"Dad, when are we coming home?" Luke asked as Anakin sat on the edge of his bed. Leia was in the bed across from Luke's propped on one elbow.

"I don't know," Anakin replied. "There are a lot of things your mother and I need to work through."

"Daddy why didn't you come to our party when you promised you would?" Leia asked.

Anakin sighed. "I just lost track of time, Leia," he told her. "It certainly wasn't my intention to miss it, and I'm very sorry for doing so. I really did want to be there."

"Mom must have been really upset that you weren't there," Luke said. "She was crying and everything."

Anakin nodded with a frown. "I know," he replied. "I've upset her a great deal. But I will make it up to her, to all of you. I promise."

"We know you will, Dad," Leia said with a smile.

"Time for bed kids."

All three turned to see Padmé standing in the doorway, and wondered how long she'd been there.

"Goodnight Luke," Anakin said, kissing first his son. "Night Leia," he added, kissing her next.

"You'll be here in the morning, right Daddy?" Leia asked.

Anakin nodded, playing with her braid briefly. "Of course," he assured her. "I'll be here."

Leia smiled and then rolled over to go to sleep. Anakin watched them for a moment longer, and then walked to the door, closing it behind him as he stepped into the corridor.

"Thank you for letting me stay the night," Anakin said to Padmé as they walked down the small set of stairs leading down from the loft.

"You don't have to keep thanking me, Anakin," she told him. She stopped outside the door of a bedroom on the second level. 'This is where you can sleep,' she told him. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight Angel," he replied, watching her as she walked to a room down the hall from his. "Senator Mothma said to give you her best," he called after her, remembering his meeting earlier.

Padmé turned to him, an expression of surprise on her face. "What did you say?"

"I said Mon Mothma sent you her regards," Anakin replied. "I spoke with her earlier today."

"You did?"

Anakin nodded, sensing that she was pleased that he'd done so. "We're meeting again in a week and bringing a list of terms to discuss," he told her. "It was a good start I think."

Padmé stared at him, her eyes warmer than they'd been since she'd first seen him in the parlor downstairs hours earlier. "That's wonderful, Ani," she said with a smile.

Anakin nodded. "Well, goodnight," he said, and then entered the bedroom, trying not to think about how unnatural it was that he and his wife were sleeping in separate beds under the same roof. He smiled as he closed the door, sensing the surprise and sense of hope in his wife. *Actions speak louder than words*, he reminded himself, hoping that his actions would be enough to prove himself to her once again.

Padmé was glad to be alone at last, for it had been difficult to see Anakin again. She could see how badly he felt, how much he regretted the situation; *but that doesn't change things*, she reminded herself. And yet, he'd spoken to Mon Mothma, he'd begun the peace process.

Was he serious about this? Or was he doing this simply to try and get back in her good graces? *Can you blame him? He's lost without you... just as you are without him...*

Getting into the bed alone, Padmé closed her eyes, doing her best not to think about Anakin sleeping in the bed just down the hallway, willing herself to be strong enough to maintain her convictions.

Later that night

The overhead lights scream mercilessly into my eyes, only adding to my torment. Nightmarish sounds surround me, but then I realize, to my horror that it's the sound of my own screams that I'm hearing. Droids surround me, mercilessly probing the tortured remains of my limbs, the pain they inflict with their cold machinery beyond imagination. I flail my phantom arm, merely a stump now, as the relentless droids attempt to hold me still so that they can finish their task. The sound of the drill is not loud enough to drown out the sound of my screams as it drills into my exposed bone...

"Lord Vader? Can you hear me?" I hear the voice as though from underwater, my hearing now strangely altered by the nightmarish mask I wear.

"Yes, my master," I reply, the sound of my own voice making my skin crawl. And then I remember Mustafar... I turn to my master, needing to know, but afraid to find out "Where is Padmé? Is she safe? Is she all right?"

"It seems in your anger...you killed her."

The pain of his words is far, far worse than anything the droids could inflict on me with their weapons of cruelty, and I feel as though my heart has been stopped, my very blood turned to ice...

"No... I couldn't have!! She was alive!! I felt her!! NO!!"

Anakin didn't realize that he was shouting in his sleep until he was awoken by a hand on his shoulder, shaking him firmly. He opened his eyes, wincing in the light that had been activated by the room's other occupant. It was Padmé. He looked at her in confusion.

"You were shouting in your sleep," she explained.

Anakin sat up, his hands trembling as they ran through his hair. "I was?" he asked.

Padmé nodded. "You must have been having a bad dream," she reasoned.

"I was," he replied quietly. "Very bad."

Padmé knew that he often relived the nightmares he'd endured as Darth Vader. She couldn't even imagine the pain he must have gone through; no wonder it was still so vivid in his mind, even after all this time. "I'm sorry," she said softly, her hand still resting on his shoulder.

Anakin looked at her, trying to discern what it was she was feeling. But her emotions were a jumble right now, and he really had no idea where he stood with her. "I'm sorry I woke you," he replied. "You need your rest."

"I wasn't asleep," she told him. "I can't seem to sleep for some reason."

"Too much going on I suppose," he suggested.

"Perhaps," she agreed. "Perhaps I'm just not used to being alone anymore."

"I know what you mean," he replied, suddenly wishing she'd leave. 'I can't sleep worth a damn without you,' he told her. "Except of course to have nightmares," he added wryly.

Padmé nodded. "That's terrible," she said, running a hand into his hair slowly. "I'm sorry."

Anakin was starting to get excited by her touch; by the way she was looking at him. "Padmé, if you're going to leave this room tonight, you'd better leave now," he told her.

Padmé didn't stop what she was doing. "Do you want me to leave?" she asked.

"No," he replied at once. "But I don't want you to do anything that makes you uncomfortable."

"That's not how I feel," she assured him.

"No?"

"No," she said, bringing her other hand up to caress the side of his face. "Not at all."

Anakin closed his eyes, his own emotions now a jumble. He wanted to take her into his bed and show her just how much he'd missed her; but at the same time he didn't want to pressure her. And yet, she was initiating something, wasn't she? It was her in his bed, touching him, making him want her by the look in her eyes... surely she knew what she was doing.

"I've missed you, Padmé," he told her, bringing his own hands up to hold her face. "I need you," he said, tentatively drawing her closer, half expecting her to pull away and run out of the room. But she didn't; and to his surprise she moved closer, needing him as much as he needed her.

A little while later...

As they lay facing one another, Anakin rested his forehead against hers, wishing that all the tension between them was behind them, and that they were home, with their children, happily awaiting the birth of their third child. *No... children*, he reflected, as he focused on Padmé's womb.

"We're having twins again, Padmé," he told her.

Padmé looked up at him in surprise. "What did you say??"

Anakin smiled. "You heard me," he said, moving a hand to her abdomen. "There are two Force signatures, not one," he told her.

Padmé was shocked, but knew better than to question him. "Do you know if they're fraternal? One of each like Luke and Leia?"

Anakin looked down at where his hand sat on her body and concentrated for a moment and then shook his head. "No, I can't tell yet," he said. 'They're too young.' He looked up at her. "But I'm certain that there are two of them, Angel."

"Oh my," she said. "We'll have our hands full, won't we?"

Anakin smiled. "We sure will," he said.

Padmé closed her eyes as she nestled against him, just as she did every night. At the back of her mind she worried that they'd only made things more complicated; but at this point she was too tired to consider it further. *Twins*, she thought with a yawn, closing her eyes as Anakin covered them up with the quilt. The last thing she remembered was Anakin kissing the top of her head before falling into the first good night's sleep she'd had in days.

Chapter 114

One hundred fourteen

Naboo

It was still dark when Anakin awoke. Having Padmé in his bed again was like a dream to him; and yet, he felt uneasy about what had happened. *Did I take advantage of her? Did I manipulate her into this? Will she resent me for it?* He wondered as he sat up in the bed. He realized now that Padmé had done what she felt was necessary in leaving him. It had been a long time since he'd seen his wife so fragile, and knew that she needed rest. More than that, she needed peace and tranquility, something she wouldn't have with him living on the capital. And as much as he hated the thought of living apart from her, he reminded himself that it wasn't forever. *And she still loves me... that hasn't changed at least.*

Leaving Padmé asleep, Anakin got dressed and left the room.

"Luke, Leia, wake up."

The twins opened their eyes, blinking in the light. "Dad? What... what's wrong?" Luke asked, rubbing his eyes.

"I have to go," Anakin said. "I just wanted to say goodbye."

"But Dad, it's the middle of the night!" Leia protested, sitting up in the bed.

"I know," Anakin replied. "But I need to give your mother some space. She needs to be away from all the craziness going on back home right now. For the sake of the babies, she needs peace."

"Babies??" Luke asked. "Mom's having twins??"

Anakin smiled. "Yes she is," he replied. "So it's doubly important for her to avoid stress. I need you two to make sure she gets plenty of rest while she's here, and I'll be back to see you as often as I can."

"I don't like this, Dad," Luke replied. "We need to be together."

Leia nodded.

"And we will be, I promise," Anakin assured them. "This isn't forever, I swear it. Soon we'll all be together again."

The twins could see that he was serious, and also that he wouldn't be dissuaded from this course of action.

"Okay Daddy," Leia replied at last, doing her best not to cry. "It's just that... we miss you when you're not with us," she told him, her eyes growing bright with tears.

"I know," Anakin said, hugging her tightly. "I miss you too. But this is for the best, sweetheart, otherwise nothing would keep me from being with you."

Luke was doing his best to keep his emotions in check, but when he saw Leia crying, he was soon doing so as well. He came over to Leia's bed to join in on the hug.

"Go back to sleep now," he told them both, kissing them on top of their heads. "I love you both, and I'll see you soon."

Leaving the twins' room once more, Anakin went to the bedroom where Padmé had started off the night. Looking around in the desk, he found what he needed and sat down at the small desk to write a note for her. Once completed, he crept back into the bedroom where she was still asleep and set the note on the table beside her. He watched her sleep for a moment, and then left the room once more.

A few hours later

Padmé woke up feeling ill, which was happening more and more frequently she noted. She hurried into the fresher, trying not to wake Anakin up. Upon returning to the bedroom a short time later, she was surprised to see that the bed was empty. Not only that, Anakin's clothes, even his cloak were gone. *It's not like him to get up so early*, she thought as she sat down on the side of the bed again. It was then that she saw an old fashioned piece of stationery on the night stand with her name written on it in what she recognized as Anakin's hand. She picked it up to read it.

My beloved Padmé

I will be on my way back to Coruscant when you awaken. I didn't want to wake you to say goodbye, you need your rest now.

I have only come to realize recently how much I have been taking you for granted, you and the twins. I hate that it took this estrangement for me to see that, but I understand why you feel we need to be apart right now. And as much as I hate it, I will abide by your wishes and not push you to do anything you're not ready for.

Know that I am ready to do whatever you need of me, Padmé, and that I will wait for you for however long you need. You're the best thing in my life, and I'm sorry I took you for granted. I have no right to expect anything from you except your resentment and disdain, and yet you give me so much more each and every day we're together. Last night was so unexpected, and so wonderful; however I'm feeling guilty now, as though I somehow took advantage of you. That is the last thing I would ever want to do, Angel. You mean more to me than anything in the universe, I wouldn't be the man I am today without you.

While we're apart I will be doing my best to make the galaxy a better place; and that will start with peace. You were right, you're always right, only I'm too stubborn and egotistical to listen.

If it is okay with you I will visit you and the twins while you're resting on Naboo. I hope in time you'll feel like we can be together. Until then I will do my best to earn your trust, again, and do what I can to atone for what I've done to you and our family.

I love you.

Anakin

Padmé sat for a moment after reading the letter, not sure how to feel. She too felt ambivalent about what had happened the previous night; but she also knew that to deny how much she needed Anakin was foolhardy. *And now he's gone*, she thought, the thought of it making a lump form in her throat. *But that's what you want, isn't it?* She reminded herself. *You came here to get away from him — so why are you miserable now that he's gone?*

Padmé read the letter again, the words he'd written only adding to her confusion. It truly sounded as though he had turned over a new leaf, that he was dedicating himself to the change that she'd preached to him for so long. Was losing her and the twins the wake up call he needed? Would things be better now?

Never having been a woman to second guess herself, Padmé found herself doing just that as she sat with Anakin's letter in her hand. *Someone tell me what to do*, she thought, closing her eyes. *Because I don't know anymore!*

Deciding to get dressed and start her day, Padmé left the room and returned to her own room, determined not to let her emotions stress her out.

Coruscant

Anakin arrived back home late in the evening local time. He hated entering the house knowing his family wasn't there, but also knew that he had no one to blame but himself for that fact.

"Well? How did your visit go?" Obi-Wan asked, meeting Anakin in the foyer.

"Better than I'd expected actually," Anakin replied.

"That's encouraging," Obi-Wan responded.

"Yes," Anakin agreed as they walked into his office. 'I'm hoping that my actions will convince her that I've changed,' he said as he sat down at his desk. "And that I'm not the same jerk that missed his own children's birthday party."

Obi-Wan nodded. "And what actions are you referring to, exactly?"

"Well, for starters I've already begun peace talks with the Alliance," Anakin told him.

"A good start," Obi-Wan agreed.

"I'm going to need your help, Obi-Wan," Anakin said, looking up at his friend. "There's a lot to do, and I can't do it alone."

Obi-Wan sat down to face Anakin. "Just tell me what you need me to do," he replied.

Anakin smiled. "You may change your mind when I tell you everything," he said.

"Try me," Obi-Wan retorted, folding his arms over his chest.

"For starters, I'm going to need you to help me negotiate with the Alliance," he began. "You know me; I've never been a diplomat. And with Padmé out of the picture for now, I'll need someone with a little more... tact than I possess."

"Yes I agree," Obi-Wan replied. "When do you meet with Senator Mothma again?"

“Four days’ time,” Anakin replied. “I need to meet with my senior officers and the remaining governors first. I’ve asked Riema to do a thorough check on them all. It’s time to trim the fat.”

“Might I recommend she run a check on the Senate as well?” Obi-Wan suggested. “During the ten years of Palatine’s reign there was a great deal of nepotism going on at the senate. I’m certain there are quite a few corrupt politicians still lurking about even after Palpatine’s demise.”

“Good idea,” Anakin replied. ‘I want to start with a clean slate, Obi-Wan,’ he said. “Root out all the corruption and decadence that was the hallmark of the Empire for the past ten years. And then slowly return power to the Senate.”

“A good plan,” Obi-Wan replied. “But what of the Death Star?”

Anakin said nothing for a moment, for that had been a great source of contention between him and Padmé, and one of the main reasons she’d left. “I haven’t decided about that yet,” he admitted.

“I can assure you, Anakin, that it will be at the top of the Rebel Alliance’s list,” he said. “So you’d better decide what to do with it and quickly.”

Anakin frowned. “I know,” he said. “You see why I need your help?”

Obi-Wan smiled. “Always happy to help,” he replied.

“There’s something else I’ve been considering,” Anakin added, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

“What is that?”

“The Jedi Temple,” Anakin replied. ‘I was hoping you’d be willing to go there,’ he continued. “See what needs to be done to get it cleaned up, renovated, modernized; whatever it takes to get it up and running again.”

Obi-Wan was surprised by Anakin’s request, and sensed a great deal of uneasiness in him as he discussed the temple. “You mean to use it again?” he asked.

Anakin nodded. “I want to start the Jedi Order up again,” he said. “And I’ll need your help to do that.”

“There is someone else whose help you might appreciate,” Obi-Wan suggested. “Master Yoda.”

“Yes, of course,” Anakin replied. “Perhaps it’s time to bring him into the picture.”

“I’d be happy to do that,” Obi-Wan offered. “That is, unless you have the time to do it yourself,” he added.

Anakin smiled. “I’d appreciate that,” he said. ‘And come to think of it, I think you’re going to need an assistant,’ he added. “And I know just the person for the job.”

Naboo

Sola was surprised and yet somewhat relieved that Anakin had left early, for she anticipated more tension for her sister. She was certain that Padmé's blood pressure had skyrocketed just by having him around, and was determined to prove her point by having the medidroid take Padmé's readings first thing.

"This really isn't necessary," Padmé assured her sister as Sola summoned the medidroid. "I was just at the doctor yesterday."

"And what was your blood pressure reading?" Sola asked as the droid prepared to take Padmé's reading.

"136 over 76," Padmé replied with a sigh.

"Okay," Sola said. "So that's our base line. I just want to make sure it hasn't risen," she explained.

"You mean because Anakin was here," Padmé said.

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean," Sola admitted.

Padmé said nothing more, and waited for the droid to perform its task. It did so in a matter of moments, and had the reading ready.

"Well?" Sola asked, arms folded over her chest.

"The reading is 126 over 68," the droid replied.

Sola started, and looked at the droid. "Are you sure??"

"Please repeat the question," the droid responded.

"You heard what it said," Padmé said. "It's lower, not higher. Imagine that."

Sola frowned. "I can't imagine why," she replied.

Padmé smiled, thinking back to how she and Anakin had spent the night making torrid love. *I think I know*, she mused. "No, neither can I," she replied, standing up and starting to leave the room.

"Now wait just a minute, Padmé," Sola said, causing Padmé to turn back. "Please don't tell me that one anomalous reading is going to make you go back to him."

Padmé frowned. "This wasn't a decision I made lightly, Sola," she replied. 'Just because Anakin and I didn't fight doesn't mean things are fine between us. I know the cycle all too well. We make up, he makes another comment or disappoints me and the twins again, and the fights start all over again.'

Sola took her hand. "I hate to say it, but you're right," she said.

"That's not to say that things will always be this way," Padmé continued. 'He told me last night that he'd started peace talks with the Rebel Alliance. I can't tell you how happy I was to hear that, Sola,' she added. "And it gives me hope that maybe he's begun to change."

"I hope so, Padmé," Sola replied. "But I don't you getting your hopes up. You don't need more disappointment."

Padmé said nothing in reply, knowing all too well that her sister was right.

Coruscant

"Welcome home sir," Riema said as she entered the office. As she did so, she had the distinct impression that the two men had been talking about her. She looked at them each, waiting for one of them to say something. "Am I interrupting something?" she asked.

"No, your timing is perfect," Anakin told her. 'I was just telling Obi-Wan that he was going to need an assistant with all the jobs I've delegated to him,' he told her. "And I was hoping that you would help him out."

Riema looked at Obi-Wan, unable to prevent the blush from rising in her cheeks. "I'd be happy to sir," she replied. "But what will you do for an assistant?" she asked.

"Don't worry about me," he told her. "I'll be running around so much in the next couple of weeks you wouldn't be able to keep up with me anyway," he added with a smile.

"I would appreciate the help, Riema," Obi-Wan told her. "I'm something of a novice in the field of politics after all," he added.

"I'll be most pleased to help you in any way I can," Riema replied. 'And you as well, sir,' she added, looking back at Anakin. "Whenever you need it."

"Thank you Riema," Anakin replied.

"I came in to let you know that I've completed the check on the governors you asked for," she said, handing Anakin a datapad. "and the meeting is set for tomorrow at 1000 hours."

"Excellent," Anakin replied, taking the datapad. 'That will give me the time I need to study this. I need a check on the senate too,' he remembered. "Even though I told you I didn't need any help, I guess I do," he said, smiling sheepishly.

Riema laughed. "So I see," she replied. "I'll get right on that," she said.

"Thanks again," Anakin said as she left the room again.

"You really are a sly devil," Obi-Wan said as soon as she'd left the room.

Anakin looked at him with an expression of innocence. "What are you talking about?"

"You know bloody well what I'm talking about," Obi-Wan replied. "Assigning Riema to be my assistant. Just what is it you're trying to accomplish?"

Anakin smiled as he stood up. "Just a gentle push that you both need," he told him. 'I'm going to read this,' he said. "I'm sure it will prove quite interesting. Have a good trip to... where did you say Yoda was?"

"I didn't," Obi-Wan replied. "He's been on Dagobah for ten years."

Anakin nodded. "From what I've heard of Dagobah, it's been a long ten years," he commented. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Obi-Wan watched him leave, and then left the office to prepare for his voyage.

Naboo

"I'm going to go into the office this afternoon for a few hours," Sola told Padme as they sat down with the twins at lunch. "I hope you don't mind."

“Of course not,” Padme replied. “Why would I?”

“Just make yourselves at home,” Sola said. “Maybe we can go out for dinner tonight if you’re up to it.”

“That sounds like fun,” Leia said with a smile. “Too bad Daddy couldn’t stay to come with us.”

“I’m sorry he had to leave so suddenly,” Padmé said, remembering overhearing Anakin promise the twins he’d be there to see them in the morning. “I’m sure he hated leaving without saying goodbye to you.”

“He did say goodbye,” Luke informed her.

“He woke us up so he could,” Leia added.

Padme was surprised to hear it, but no more than Sola.

“Really? He woke you up so he could say goodbye?” Sola asked.

“He promised he’d see us in the morning,” Luke said. “And he didn’t want to disappoint us.”

“He told us he’d be back to see us soon,” Leia added.

Sola looked at Padmé. “Did he tell you that?” she asked.

“Well, he hinted that he might,” she said, remembering his letter.

“Isn’t it awesome that you’re having twins again, Mom?” Leia asked with a smile.

Padmé frowned. “How do you know that?” she asked.

“Dad told us,” Luke piped up. ‘He knows.’

Padmé smiled, remembering the moment he’d told her. “Yes, he does, doesn’t he?” she said.

Sola looked on, getting the distinct impression that she was missing something. Clearly more had gone on between Padmé and Anakin than she’d realized, and she was starting to realize what it was. *No wonder her blood pressure was lower, she reflected. That would do it for me too.*

“Well I’m off,” she said, standing up. “Have a good afternoon, and call me if you need anything.”

“We’ll be fine,” Padmé assured her. “Don’t worry.”

Sola nodded, and then took her leave of Padmé and the twins.

Chapter 115

One hundred fifteen

Coruscant

It was close to midnight, and Anakin was still unable to fall asleep. He tried meditation—something he had never been particularly good at — but that didn't work. He'd even had a vigorous work out during the evening to get tired; but he suspected that had only made matters worse. The reason he couldn't sleep had nothing to do with being tired or his mind being too occupied: Padmé wasn't there.

Not having her warm body nestled up against him was making it impossible for him to sleep. And the longer he remained in their bed alone, the worse his agitation grew. Finally, deciding this was futile, Anakin got up, put on some trousers, and left the bedroom.

The house was quiet of course, since he was the only one awake except for the night sentinels. He wandered down the vast hallway, finding himself at Luke's room. He entered the room, activating the lights as he did so. Anakin smiled as he looked around, at all the models Luke had on display, models he'd built with his own two hands, models he'd built with his father. *When was the last time you did that?* He admonished himself bitterly. *Darth Vader was a better father than you've been.* Anakin spotted the model that had been Luke's last birthday gift from his Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru. He remembered how devastated the boy had been when it had been damaged while in transit to Coruscant. And he remembered staying up half the night fixing and refurbishing it so Luke wouldn't be so sad. *Darth Vader wouldn't have missed that party— he would have moved planets to get there, no matter what. And you think you're better than him?*

Anakin left his son's room and entered Leia's room next. Not surprisingly it was impeccably neat and organized. He looked at all the holos Leia had arranged on her dresser, holos of her and Luke together, of her and her parents, her friends. She looked so happy in all of them, her smile radiant. *And yet somehow you managed to remove that beautiful smile,* he reminded himself. *You let her down, just when she finally started to trust again, just when she believed in you unwaveringly.*

Anakin left the room, determined that he wouldn't mess up again. He vowed that he would make it up to them, to their mother, all of them. And now there were two more on the way. *I won't miss out on their infancy as I did Luke and Leia's,* he vowed. *I will be here for these little ones from day one.*

Anakin started on his way back to bed and found himself outside one of the unused rooms. It was quite large, and had nothing in it but some storage crates that hadn't been put away yet. And then he had an idea, a way to connect to his two newest children, a way to show his wife that he was serious about his commitment to her, and, most important of all, a way to show Padmé that being a father was far more important to him than being an emperor. He smiled as the plans started to unfold in his mind, and before long, he was hurrying down to the workshop to start putting them into action.

Naboo

Luke and Leia sat through their lessons, neither of them paying particular attention to their teacher. Neither could focus, for they both had too much on their minds.

Seeing their father the previous day only to have him leave again in the middle of the night had confused the twins. If their parents were estranged, then why did Luke and Leia both feel such strong feelings from each of them? And they were not negative feelings, as one might expect from a couple who had been quarrelling, a couple with irreconcilable differences; they were feelings of warmth, of the same intense love that Luke and Leia had come to expect from their mother and father. *So why are we here when Dad is there?*

Luke sighed and sat back in his chair.

"Sit up straight, Luke," Leia chided him.

"What for? She can't see me," he reminded his sister.

"That doesn't matter," Leia replied.

Luke smiled. "I could make a face at her and she wouldn't know," he said.

Leia scowled. "You're so immature, Luke," she said, standing up and walking away.

Luke rolled his eyes, and after a moment's consideration, followed her.

"I miss Dad," Luke said as he followed Leia into the kitchen to find a drink.

"Me too," Leia sighed. And then she had an idea. "You know, I still have that comlink that Dad gave us," she told her brother.

Luke frowned. "How come *you* have it?" he demanded.

"Probably because Dad knew *you'd* lose it," she retorted.

"I would not!" Luke declared hotly.

"Oh who cares who has it," Leia responded impatiently. "It's not the point. The point is, we can contact Dad. We can talk to him whenever we want, Luke."

Luke's eyes widened as he listened. "Yeah, *yeah!*" he replied. "Come on, let's go find it!"

"I know *exactly* where it is, Luke," she informed him as he dragged her upstairs towards the loft. "There's no need to *find* it."

Luke simply rolled his eyes and continued to pull her along.

Coruscant

Anakin had spent nearly three hours in the workshop when he finally felt as though sleep may just be a possibility. He headed upstairs, yawning as he reached the door to his bedroom. He had just climbed back into bed when his comlink sounded.

"What is it?" he asked, wondering who would be contacting him at such an hour.

"Hi Dad!"

Anakin smiled when he heard his twins' voices in unison. "Hi there," he said. "It's good to hear your voices."

"It's good to hear yours too," Leia said. "What are you doing?"
"Well, it's nearly three here, so I was just getting into bed, actually," Anakin told them. "What are you doing?"

"We're supposed to be in history class," Luke told him. "But we left 'cause it was so boring."

Anakin was glad his children couldn't see his smile of amusement. "You shouldn't be ditching classes like that," he told them. "School is important."

"We know," they replied in unison, and Anakin could almost see them rolling their eyes.

"How is your mother?" he asked.

"She's good," Leia reported. "Her blood pressure was lower this morning, Dad. Isn't that great?"

"That's wonderful news," Anakin replied.

"Yeah, Aunt Sola couldn't believe it," Luke piped up. 'She figured for sure it would be higher because you'd been here.'

Anakin smiled. "I guess Aunt Sola was wrong," he remarked.

"Hey Dad, guess what?" Leia said, wanting her turn. 'We're going up to the Lake Retreat tomorrow,' she said. "Can you come up and see us?"

"I have an important meeting tomorrow morning," Anakin told her. "But perhaps later on in the day, if your mother wouldn't mind."

"She wouldn't," Luke assured him. "She misses you as much as we do, Dad."

"I miss her too," Anakin replied. "I'd better get to bed, kids. I'll do my best to come up tomorrow night, okay?"

"Okay Dad," the twins replied. "We love you!!"

"I love you too," Anakin replied. "Be good."

Luke and Leia smiled, remembering the days when their father was still in the suit, and how he usually ended their communication with those same words.

"Sweet dreams, Daddy," Leia said.

"Thanks sweetheart. Bye."

Anakin got into bed, a smile on his face. Hearing his children's' voices had made his day. *They're going to the lake*, he thought as he closed his eyes. His smile grew as he thought of all the wonderful memories he had of that magical place, and soon he found himself asleep and dreaming of it once again.

The morning is sunny and warm as we travel to the Lake District. The island where the Naberrie estate is located is very remote and only accessible by boat. I don't like boats. Just the thought of several meters, or several hundred meters, of water beneath me is rather

disquieting. This trip, however, is not as bad as I had anticipated; partly because the waters are still and calm, and partly because Padmé is distracting me from my uneasiness.

She is dressed in a flowing gown that leaves her back and arms bare. I watch her as she closes her eyes against the lake breeze that blows softly across the bow of the boat, ruffling the hair around her face and the delicate fabric of her gown. I can scarcely tear my eyes away from her, and I begin to worry that being secluded with her will be more than I can take. How long am I going to be able hold my feelings for her at bay when I am constantly being tortured by her this way? All the Jedi training in the galaxy cannot subdue such feelings. They are real, and are slowly starting to consume me. It is only a matter of time before they are undeniable, and irrepressible.

We reach the estate, a magnificent mansion of rounded stone buildings set upon an island. We travel up a canal where servants await to assist us ashore. I climb out first and turn to Padmé, holding my hand to her. She puts her hand in mine and steps ashore with me. We climb the stone steps and walk around the balcony.

“We used to come here on school retreat,” she tells me as we stroll along. “See that island out there?” she asks, pointing across the lake.

“Yes,” I reply tearing my eyes from her to look.

“We’d swim out to the island every day,” she tells me as she stops and leans against the railing. “I love the water.” She stops and closes her eyes against the bright sun. I watch her, her face serene, and more relaxed than I’ve seen in a long time. I lean beside her, content just to look at her.

“We’d lie out on the sand and let the sun dry us,” she continues, opening her eyes again. “And guess the name of the birds singing.”

“I don’t like sand,” I tell her. ‘It’s coarse, and rough, and it gets everywhere,’ I add, looking at the silken texture of her bare back. I can’t help myself, and tentatively reach out to touch her. “Not like here,” I say, gently stroking the silken skin. “Everything here is so soft, so smooth...” I say, slowly drawing my finger down her velvety back. It is just as I imagined it would feel, and I find myself unable to stop myself. She does not pull away, as I half expected her to. Instead she turns and looks at me, her eyes reflecting the desire that I know is within her, despite her efforts to conceal it. I lean forward, my heart pounding within me, wanting more than anything to taste the sweetness of her beautiful mouth. To my utter surprise, she moves towards me, and we meet. Our lips meet, tentatively at first. We hold back for a moment, not quite sure what to expect, but soon the passion overtakes us, and our mouths open to explore one another’s, our tongues meeting in a slow, sensual embrace. This is paradise... Padmé, sweet Padmé...I love...

She pulls away, suddenly and without warning. “I shouldn’t have done that,” she says as she moves away, her eyes looking out at the lake again, and her shoulders tense. I stand stunned for a moment, too shocked to react. What do you mean, you shouldn’t have done that?? You did it! And you loved it as much as I did! You wanted it as much as I did! How can you just take that back??

“I’m ..sorry,” I manage to stutter, not quite knowing what else to say. I move away from her, blinking in bewilderment, trying to master the passions that have flooded my body and

soul.

As he slept, Anakin instinctively moved his hand over to the other side of the bed. But Padmé wasn't there, and her absence roused him from his sleep. He opened his eyes, sadness filling him in stark contrast to the lovely dream he'd just been having. *I will get her back*, he vowed as he took the pillow where she normally slept and wrapped his arms around it, drinking in the scent of her that was still present on it. *We'll be together again, I swear it.*

The next morning

"Master Anakin... Master Anakin please wake up."

Anakin opened one eye and looked up to see See Threepio standing beside his bed. "What?" he growled, closing his eye again.

"Sir, the formal dining room is full of people," the droid reported. "And they are wondering where you are."

Anakin's eyes snapped open at this and he sat up at once. "What time is it?" he asked, jumping out of bed.

"It's a quarter past 1000, sir," Threepio reported.

"Damn it," Anakin muttered as he headed for the fresher. "Tell them I'll be there in twenty minutes!" he called to the droid as he slammed the door behind him.

Threepio left the bedroom again, and met Artoo Detoo in the corridor.

"Yes I woke him up," Threepio replied as Artoo interrogated him. 'It is *not* my fault that he overslept,' Threepio replied testily. "I'm not an alarm chrono, my programming isn't designed for that purpose," he declared snootily and then shuffled off down the corridor to inform the assembled officials below that the emperor would be delayed a little longer.

Downstairs

"Well this is preposterous," muttered one admiral, looking at his wrist chrono once more. "He demands we be here at 1000 sharp, and here it is almost 1100!"

Captain Piett, who had the misfortune to be sitting beside the man, looked away, lest he see the expression on his face.

"I suppose Emperor Skywalker must have had other more pressing concerns that is keeping him," Tagge remarked. "He's usually very punctual."

"Nonsense," the admiral replied. 'This is just him exerting his power,' he stated. "He's showing us he's in charge."

"Well, he *is* in charge," another admiral spoke up. "And if he wants to keep us waiting, then that is his prerogative."

"I suppose it is," the first admiral said. "But it's bad manners, nonetheless."

"Sorry to keep you waiting, gentlemen," Anakin said as he entered the room. The gathered officers stood up as he approached the table, all talking coming to a halt. "Please be seated."

The officers sat down, each of them surprised by Anakin's apology. Clearly he was not the same man they'd once feared Darth Vader.

"Before we get down to business, there are some important matters to take care of," Anakin began, signaling to Riema. "My assistant is going to call out a number of names. When you hear yours, I want you to stand up and remain standing."

The assemblage seemed a little confused by this, and yet they knew better than to question his orders. Riema stood up and began to call off names. One by one each of the officers named stood up, each one looking rather uneasy at having to do so.

Anakin waited for Riema to finish her list before standing up. "Those of you who are standing are to be commended," he began. "Your service records are exemplary, your loyalty to your officers and crewmen unwavering. You will be rewarded for your hard work, ladies and gentlemen."

Those who were standing looked around at one another, greatly relieved and pleased to hear the emperor's words. Those who were seated, however, began to grow uneasy.

"Those of you who are seated, are under arrest," Anakin continued, signaling for the clone troopers who stood at the periphery of the room. "You have been investigated and I have discovered each of you is guilty of several counts of either embezzlement, fraud, negligence or a combination of them all," he continued as the clones apprehended each of the stunned officers.

The officers who'd been standing stood back as their less fortunate colleagues were hauled away, many of them protesting their innocence. Once they'd been removed, and the chairs had been set right once more, Anakin sat down again.

"Please sit," he said to the now smaller assemblage. "Now we can get down to business."

Chapter 116

One hundred sixteen

The meeting extended into the afternoon, and the officers were delighted to be treated to a sumptuous lunch. It was clear to all present that while the young emperor was very much in charge, he was also not interested in being a dictator like his predecessor had been. Anakin encouraged contributions, asked for input from all of them, and seemed to be genuinely appreciative of their efforts.

It was mid-afternoon and Anakin was in his office when Riema entered the room.

"I forwarded the casualty report from the recent pursuit," she told him. "The Death Star spies," she added.

Anakin nodded. "A very costly waste of time, that," he muttered as he brought up the report on his computer.

Riema remained silent for a moment, and then spoke up. "If you don't mind me saying so, sir," she began, "I wanted to tell you how well I thought today's meeting went."

Anakin looked up at her. "It did go well," he agreed. "I think we made some real progress today."

"I think so too," she replied. "As well as with the Rebel Alliance," she added.

Anakin nodded. "Yes," he said. "It would make Padmé happy to see what I'm trying to accomplish. I just wish she was here to see it," he added, a frown forming on his brow.

Riema felt badly for him, for in the short time she'd been in his employ, she'd come to see just how devoted Anakin was to his wife. She could see how lost he was without her, how each day was a struggle for him to function without her. And yet he was; more than that, he was taking serious steps towards bettering the galaxy. *And she needs to know that*, she reflected. And then she had an idea.

"You could have a press conference," Riema suggested. "No doubt the media are aware of the meeting here today. This way you could put to rest all the ridiculous speculation that are bound to start flying about," she continued. "Not to mention letting certain individuals know what you've been up to lately."

Anakin smiled. "Good idea," he said. "Only I was planning on going to Naboo this evening," he told her. "I told the twins I'd be there, and I don't want to let them down again."

"It's still early," she countered. "I could have the whole thing arranged in an hour if you wish," she told him.

"An hour?" he said.

She nodded in response.

"I'm impressed," he told her. "Very well, make the arrangements. I'll meet you in the media room in an hour."

"Very good, sir," she said. "I'll have everything ready."

Riema left the room, and Anakin returned to the report on his computer. It outlined the names of the individuals who had been apprehended, as well as those who had died during the pursuit. Anakin shook his head as he read through, the average age of the spies being no more than twenty-six years old. One piece of information in particular struck Anakin as being particularly tragic, and he read it again to be sure he'd read it correctly:

Coris Ferran, age twenty-eight, native of Corellia, survived by son Caton, age three and daughter Aria, age eighteen months.

Anakin remembered how outraged Padmé had been many months earlier when he had killed the foreman working in their home, leaving his wife alone with their small children. *And now here's another widow with small children,* he thought with a frown. *This is madness... it has to end...*

He sat for a moment more, scanning over the rest of the report; but the thought of those two small children left without a father never wandered far from his mind. Upon completing the report, Anakin pondered for a moment, and then began to do some investigating. Being the emperor certainly had its privileges, for he was able to find out quite easily the particulars of this man and his family. And when he learned that Coris Ferran had been a widower of nearly six months, he knew he had to do something.

"Hello Anakin. Good to see you it is."

Anakin turned in his chair to see Obi-Wan standing in the doorway, with Yoda at his side.

"Master Yoda," Anakin said, standing up and walking over to them. "It's good to see you too."

Yoda looked up at Anakin, sensing the tremendous change within him. "A great change in you there has been," he said. "Gone the Darkness is."

Anakin nodded. "Yes Master," he said. "Completely gone."

Yoda regarded Anakin for a moment before responding. "Fulfilled the prophesy you have," he said. "Destroyed the Sith you did. Unexpected that was, unexpected and unprecedented."

"Palpatine killed his master," Anakin reminded him. "It was the way of the Sith."

"I don't think Master Yoda means Palpatine's death when he says unprecedented," Obi-Wan put in at this point. "I believe he means that someone returning from the Dark Side as you have, Anakin — that is unprecedented."

Anakin nodded. "I suppose it is," he agreed. "I mean to atone for what I did, Master Yoda," he continued. "As best I can. I want to reinstitute the Order, with your help."

"Obi-Wan told me of your plans," Yoda replied. "Pleased I am to help," he added with a slow smile.

Anakin smiled back.

"It's been a long journey," Obi-Wan said. "I'm sure you'd like some rest, Master Yoda."

Yoda nodded, and Anakin suddenly noticed how old he looked, as though he'd aged far more than ten years.

"I'll show Master Yoda to a room," Obi-Wan suggested.

Anakin nodded, and then headed upstairs himself to prepare for the press conference.

Naboo

Luke and Leia had just gone to bed, and Han was flipping around the holonet frequency for something to watch. He stopped when he saw that there was an upcoming press conference from the emperor, and activated his comlink.

"Milady there's something on the 'net you might want to see," he told her.

"I'll be right there," Padmé replied.

Han recognized the media room and soon Riema appeared on the small dais to address the assembled reporters. Padmé entered the room as Riema was making some opening remarks to the media.

"What's going on?" Padmé asked as she sat down.

"I'm not sure," Han replied. "But the emperor is coming on in a minute," he told her.

Padmé was surprised to hear this, and grew curious. *Ani hates the media*, she thought to herself. *Why has he called a press conference?* Her curiosity was about to be sated, as Anakin appeared on the dais at that moment.

"As you are already aware, I met with my senior officers earlier today," Anakin began. "Before this meeting I had a thorough check done on these individuals, every one of them. Having discovered that several of these people had records of gross incompetence, as well as misappropriation of funds, I had them arrested on a variety of charges. My goal is a simple one: to weed out those who have spent the past decade getting rich through the exploitation of the people they were charged to govern. I will not tolerate it, nor will I tolerate people using their positions of power to extort, oppress or intimidate individuals."

Padmé was silent as she watched this, Anakin's words filling her with a mixture of emotions: pride being one of them.

"I have also begun negotiations with the Rebel Alliance," Anakin continued. "The galaxy needs peace, and the only way to obtain peace is by coming to terms with those who find reason to oppose the establishment. The Empire is corrupt, it is based on corruption, and it was built upon corruption. I will not rest until this corruption is rooted out at every level. And I will do whatever it takes to do this; including finding a peaceful resolution to the conflict that has plagued the galaxy for more than a decade." Anakin paused at this moment, and a look of sadness passed through his eyes briefly. "My wife is a very wise woman," he continued. "And she has been telling me for weeks that peace will never be obtained without making a connection with Rebel Alliance. I know that now, and I thank her for her wisdom and her support." He stopped, glanced at Riema and gave her a brief nod.

"There will now be a very short question period," Riema announced.

The shock that Anakin's words had created rendered the assembled reporters silent for a few seconds, and then the hands shot up and the shouts for attention were heard.

"Your majesty, we don't see the Empress with you, is she here? Is she well?"

"My wife and children are visiting family on Naboo," Anakin replied.

"What of the Jedi Order? Will it be resurrected now that you've assumed the name of Skywalker?"

"Yes, I have immediate plans to renovate and modernize the Jedi Temple," Anakin replied. "With plans to create a new Order."

"Since you've started peace talks with the Alliance, will Senator Bail Organa receive a royal pardon, sir?"

Anakin hesitated before responding to this question, for he had not yet decided himself what he was going to do. "I have no comment on that question at this time," he said, and then looked at Riema, giving her the signal to end the question period.

"That is all the questions His Majesty will take," she announced. "This press conference is concluded."

The reporters grumbled a bit amongst themselves, but began to file out the door.

Obi-Wan stood in the corridor, watching as the reporters filed past, and then entered the empty media room.

"That was rather impromptu," Obi-Wan remarked as he entered the room.

"It was," Anakin agreed. "It was her idea," he added, nodding in Riema's direction.

"Oh?" Obi-Wan replied.

"Well, I just thought it was a good way for the emperor to let people know what he was doing," she replied.

"Certain people in particular," Anakin added.

"I see," Obi-Wan replied. "Master Yoda is all settled in. He fell asleep," he told them with a smile.

"Is it just me or has he aged a lot?" Anakin asked.

"I think the last eleven years have been quite difficult for him," Obi-Wan replied. "He has shouldered a lot of personal guilt for what happened. That does tend to age a person."

Anakin nodded. "I'm glad he's here," he said. "You'll need help getting that Temple up and running again," he added.

"Indeed," Obi-Wan agreed. "I was just going to go over there now and get started on an inventory," he said.

"Could you use some help?" Riema offered.

"Absolutely," Obi-Wan replied. "That is, if you don't need her assistance at the moment," he asked Anakin.

“No, I’m on my way to Naboo,” Anakin told them. ‘Today marks the anniversary of the day I first found Luke and Leia,’ he told them with a smile. “I can’t miss that.”

“I should say not,” Obi-Wan agreed. “In that case, I wish you a pleasant journey.”

“Thanks,” Anakin replied. “I’ll be back in a day or so,” he told Riema.

“Have a good trip, sir,” she replied, and then left the room with Obi-Wan.

Anakin left the room too, reflecting on the news conference, and hoping that Padmé had seen it. *It’s because of you I’m doing all this, Angel*, he thought as he headed to their bedroom.

Naboo

“Wow,” Han said as the press conference concluded. “Looks like he’s been busy.”

Padmé nodded. “Yes,” she agreed. *Looks like he finally understands*, she reflected with a smile as she stood up. “Good night Han,” she said.

“Goodnight Milady,” he replied. “Sleep well.”

Padmé walked down the corridor, hearing the voices of her children as she passed by their room. She opened the door, and saw that they were each engrossed in reading a holo-novel.

“Time for bed,” she announced as she entered the room.

“Just five more minutes, Mom, please?” Leia pleaded. “I’m just at a *really* exciting part!”

Padmé smiled as she sat down on the edge of Leia’s bed. “Is that one of the discs your Aunt Sola gave you?” she asked.

Leia nodded. “It’s one of the best presents I’ve ever been given,” she said.

“That’s wonderful,” Padmé replied. “Aunt Sola will be so pleased to know you’re enjoying her gift so much.”

Luke looked up from the novel he was reading. “Mom, you remember last year when you bought us all those gifts? To make up for all the years we were apart?”

Padmé nodded.

“That was the best birthday surprise I’ve ever had,” he told her with a smile, as Leia nodded in agreement.

Padmé was moved by the twins’ words, and leaned over to give Leia a kiss, and then got up and went over to Luke’s bed to give him one.

“Five more minutes,” she said as she made her way to the door.

“Okay Mom,” they replied in unison.

Padmé gave them one more smile, and then left the room. She yawned as she walked down the corridor to her own room. And as she climbed into bed, she felt hopeful for the first time in days.

A few hours later

It was the dead of night when Padmé awoke feeling nauseous. Remembering that she hadn't eaten her usual evening snack, she got out of bed, knowing that if she didn't get something in her stomach immediately, she'd soon regret it.

Padding barefoot through the quiet house, Padmé found the kitchen. Finding some crackers, she took some out and put them on a small plate. Next she reached up into the cupboard to get a glass for some milk. Opening the refrigerator next, she poured herself a glass of milk. Turning to leave, Padmé gasped and dropped the glass, for Anakin was standing in the doorway watching her.

Chapter 117

One hundred seventeen

Naboo— Lake District

Using the Force, Anakin managed to prevent the glass from hitting the floor, and directed to the nearby counter.

“I’m sorry,” he said, walking towards her. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“I...I didn’t expect to see you,” she told him, “especially in the middle of the night.”

“I’m sure,” he replied, moving closer to her. ‘I guess perhaps I should have waited for morning to come,’ he told her. “But I couldn’t wait to see you and the kids again.”

Padmé nodded, looking up at him as he stood mere centimeters from her now.

“Are you okay?” he asked, concern filling his eyes. “What are you doing up at this hour?”

“I needed something to eat,” she told him. ‘If I don’t eat in the evening I wake up in the night feeling nauseous,’ she told him. “I forgot to eat this evening, so I came here for a snack.”

“Don’t let me stop you,” he told her. “You need to eat.”

Padmé nodded, and then moved over to pick up her crackers and the glass of milk. She sat down at the small table in the room, confused by the way she was feeling with him standing there watching her. And when he sat down at the table with her, she was shocked by how fast her heart began to race.

“I saw the press conference earlier tonight,” she told him.

“I’m glad,” he replied. “I was hoping you would.”

“Why is that?”

“I think you know why,” he replied. ‘I want you to know what I’m doing, what I should have been doing for months now,’ he added. “I want you to know that I’m finally listening to what you’ve been telling me all along,” he concluded with a smile.

Padmé couldn’t help but smile. “Imagine that,” she replied.

“I’m meeting with Mon Mothma again in a couple of days,” he told her. “Obi-Wan is going to help me with the negotiations.”

“Good,” she replied. “He’ll be very helpful I’m sure.”

Anakin nodded. “I’ve missed you,” he said, changing the subject suddenly. “I can’t sleep at night without you.”

Padmé lowered her eyes to the cracker crumbs on her plate. “Neither can I,” she admitted. “I hated waking up and finding you gone,” she told him.

"You know why I had to leave," he said.

Padmé looked up at him. "Yes," she replied.

"Just as I know why you had to leave," he continued. "I hate it, but I understand."

"I hate it too," she told him. 'But I'm afraid,' she told him, looking down again. "I'm so afraid for these babies, Ani."

"I know," he said, reaching over and taking her hand. "And if this is what you need to make you feel secure about this pregnancy, then this is what you need to do. I'm not going to pressure you into coming home until you're ready, Padmé. I hate being apart, but I will leave it to you to decide when you're ready to come back."

Padmé looked up at him, her eyes brilliant with unshed tears. "Thank you," she said softly.

Anakin reached over to touch her face, the sight of her tears almost causing his own. "You need you rest now," he told her, stroking her face slowly. "Let's get you back to bed."

Padmé stood up, Anakin following suit. "Are you coming with me?" she asked, looking up at him.

Anakin took her face in his hands. "Only if you want me to," he replied, hoping against hope that she would.

Padmé nodded, placing her hands flat against his chest. "I want you to," she assured him as her hands rose up and into his hair. "I want you," she told him.

Anakin knew that there was no mistaking the look in her eyes, and drew closer to her to kiss her. Padmé wrapped her arms around his neck, holding him captive as their kiss deepened, their bodies pressing against the other. Anakin moved his hands into her hair and then down to her shoulders, down her back, and then up again, desperate to touch her and claim her as his.

"Make love to me, Ani," Padmé whispered into his ear as Anakin's mouth moved down to her neck. "I need you so much."

Anakin looked into her eyes, his own need for her consuming him. "I need you too," he told her, kissing her again. Without breaking their kiss, he picked her up into his arms and carried her out of the room.

"I wasn't sure if you'd regret what happened the last time we were together," Anakin said as they reached her bedroom. "I tried to hold myself back, but I couldn't, and had the feeling you didn't want me to."

Padmé shook her head. "I didn't want you to," she assured him. 'We may be living apart right now, but I never want you to feel unwelcome in my bed, Anakin,' she told him. "Never."

"You're so beautiful," he told her softly as he looked down into her eyes, his fingers slowly working through her hair.

Padmé smiled. "You make me feel beautiful," she told him, taking his face in her hands.

"I love you so much," he told as Padmé worked her hands into his hair.

"I love you too," she whispered back, closing her eyes and losing herself in the moment....

The next morning

Anakin awoke to see Padmé standing at the mirror, pinning up her hair.

"Good morning," he said.

Padmé turned around to him. "Good morning," she replied. "Did you sleep well?"

"Like a dead man," he told her, stretching in the bed. "You're up early," he commented.

"It's not early, Ani," she told him. "It's almost ten. I didn't want to wake you since you were sleeping so soundly."

"I wouldn't have minded," he assured her with a smile.

Padmé laughed. "I'm sure the twins are awake, and will sense you're here," she told him. "You may want to get some clothes on," she concluded with a smile.

"Yes, good idea," he said, getting out of bed. He found his shorts and trousers under the bed and walked over to Padmé as she returned her attention to the mirror. "How is my Angel this morning?" he asked, wrapping his arms around her from behind and nuzzling her neck.

"Your beard is scratchy," she teased.

"Is that a hint?" he asked, looking at her reflection in the mirror.

Padmé laughed, turning her face to kiss his. "Not at all," she said. "I love you when you're scruffy."

Just then a knock was heard on the door, and Anakin released his wife. "Come in," he called, knowing that it was Luke and Leia on the other side.

"Dad!" the twins cried as the door burst open, and then ran to him. Anakin embraced them tightly, kissing them each on the top of the head.

"I told you I'd come," he assured them. 'Let's go get some breakfast,' he said. "I'm starved."

"Me too," Luke agreed.

At breakfast, Anakin filled Padmé in on the latest developments back home. She listened with great interest, grateful that he valued her input.

"I found out that one of the casualties from the pursuit was a widower," he told her. "And that he left two small children behind."

Padmé frowned. "How tragic," she replied.

Anakin nodded. "I know," he said. "This Rebellion has to end; there's been too much loss of life already."

"Dad what's going to happen to those little kids?" Leia asked.

"They'll become wards of the court," Anakin told her. "Until such time when and if someone adopts them."

“And if nobody does?” Leia asked.

Anakin shrugged. “I suppose they’d live in the government run orphanage until they’re old enough to live on their own,” he said.

“That’s terrible,” Padmé said.

“I know,” Anakin agreed.

“What if we adopted them?” Leia suggested.

Padmé and Anakin looked at one another with wide eyes.

“A nice idea sweetheart,” Anakin said. “But your mother is carrying twins. Six kids is more than either of us is willing to handle right now,” he told him.

“I know someone who *could* adopt them,” Leia said after a moment’s consideration.

“Who?” Padmé asked.

“Queen Breha,” Leia replied. “You know how sad she’s been since Dad found me and took me to live with him,” she added.

“Yes, she was devastated to lose you,” Padmé replied. She looked at Anakin. “I think this is a great idea,” she said.

Anakin nodded. “So do I,” he replied. ‘I’ll arrange to see them both when I get back to the capital.’ He looked at Luke, who was uncharacteristically quiet. “Luke, are you okay?” he asked.

Luke looked up at his father. “Yeah,” he replied. ‘I just realized that it’s been a year since Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru died,’ he told his father. “One year ago today.”

Anakin nodded. “I know,” he said. ‘It was also a year ago that I found the two of you,’ he added, looking at Leia. “Do you remember that meeting you came to, Leia?”

Leia nodded. “And how we went for a walk?”

“Yes,” Anakin replied. ‘And Luke had his accident,’ he said, looking at Luke. “And we both felt it.”

Luke nodded. “I still miss them,” he said quietly. ‘I know I have a great life, and I love you and Mom so much... but I still miss them,’ he concluded, fighting back the tears. “Stupid, eh?”

“Not stupid at all, Luke,” Padmé said, reaching over and putting her hand on his. “We all miss people we love when they’re gone, no matter how well our life is going. You’ll always treasure their memories, and you should. They were an important part of your life.”

Luke nodded, lowering his eyes to his cereal so his parents and sister wouldn’t see the tears in them. But none of them needed to see them to know that the boy was crying.

“What do you two say to some swimming after breakfast?” Anakin suggested.

“Sounds great Dad,” Leia replied.

Chapter 118

One hundred eighteen

Anakin hated to leave his family, but knew that he must, for he had important business waiting for him on the capital. And so the next morning he bade farewell to his children, both of whom were disappointed by the brevity of his visit.

Padmé walked down to the pier with him, hating to see him go as much as the twins did, perhaps more so.

"Will you let me know how your meeting with Mon goes?" she asked him as they stood on the dock together.

"I'll contact you later on tonight," he told her.

Padmé nodded. "I had an idea," she said. "I'm not sure you'll want to hear it," she added.

"Of course I want to hear it," he said. "What is it?"

"It's about the Death Star," she said.

"Okay," Anakin replied. "I'm listening."

"What if you changed its function?" she said. 'I mean once the Rebellion is over, there will be no need to use it as a deterrent,' she continued. "Right?"

"Right," he agreed.

"Not to mention the fact that the Alliance will no doubt have that high on their list of grievances," she told him.

"Yes, Obi-Wan said the same thing," he replied. 'I'm intrigued,' he said. "What exactly did you have in mind? What do I do with the damnable thing?"

"Turn it into a research station," she replied. 'One that is open to all beings in the galaxy to use. What's the sense of letting all that technology go to waste?' She paused for a moment as he considered her words. "What do you think?"

"I think it's a valid idea," he replied. "I'll look into it."

"You will? Really??" she asked.

Anakin smiled. "Of course I will," he replied, putting his hands on her shoulders. "Perhaps I'll mention your idea to Senator Mothma," he added.

"I think that would go far with her," Padmé replied.

"Then I will," he said. He glanced over to where the gondola was in position for departure. 'I'd better go,' he told her. He pulled her into his embrace. "I'll miss you," he told her, kissing the top of her head.

"I'll miss you too," she replied, hugging him back.

For a moment they just stood together in the embrace of one another, and then he left her to return to the galaxy that was waiting for him to heal it.

Coruscant — later that same day

"Good afternoon Senator," Anakin said, standing up as Riema showed Mon Mothma into his office. "You remember General Kenobi, I'm sure," he added, turning to Obi-Wan.

Mon Mothma nodded. "It's a pleasure to see you again, General Kenobi," she said with a smile.

Obi-Wan bowed to her in response. "For me as well, Senator," he replied.

"Please sit down," Anakin said, as he took his own seat. Mothma sat down, somewhat surprised to see Obi-Wan present.

"I've come up with a list that I hope you will find acceptable," Mothma began.

"As have I," Anakin replied.

"Shall we exchange our lists and take a few moments to read them over?" Mothma suggested.

"Yes, good idea," Anakin replied. He picked up a data disc on his desk and handed it to her.

"I saw the press conference, by the way," Mothma said as she took the disc. "It was most encouraging," she added, handing him her disc in return.

"It's a step in the right direction," Obi-Wan said. "One of many I believe," he added.

Anakin nodded as he fed the disc into the data reader on his desk. "We have a long way to go," he said, "but at least we're on track now."

Mothma nodded in agreement as she fed the disc he'd given her into her portable reader.

The three were silent for a few moments as each read through the list provided by the other. Anakin was not at all surprised by the list she'd provided, nor was he surprised that the Death Star was the first item on the list.

"Well, seems we have some work to do," Mothma said after a few minutes.

"Indeed," Anakin agreed. "There is something I ought to mention to you," he added after a moment's thought. "About the Death Star."

Mothma's interest was piqued. "Oh?"

"A suggestion my wife had," Anakin continued. "Rather than destroying it, as you've indicated you'd like to see done," he said, nodding at the datareader; "we change its function, change it to something constructive rather than simply wasting all the money that went into it and all the technology that it offers."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Mothma admitted.

“Padmé suggested that we turn it into a research station,” Anakin explained. “Disarm it, remodel it, do whatever it takes to remake it into something useful.”

“A new name might also be a good idea,” Obi-Wan suggested.

Mothma nodded, liking the idea at once. “Yes, yes that’s good,” she said. “I think that’s a splendid idea.”

Anakin smiled, encouraged by the good start they’d made. “Good,” he said. ‘That’s going to take some work,’ he told her. “But I think that within a couple of weeks we could have the station revamped into something we can both live with.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Mothma replied.

“I see that Bail Organa’s name is on your list,” Anakin remarked, looking back at the computer screen.

“I know that you and he have a history,” Mothma began.

“You could say so,” Anakin replied somewhat tersely. “He lied to my wife and stole our daughter from her.”

“I know,” Mothma replied. “I regret terribly the animosity between the two of you. But the way I see it, there will never really be peace so long as the two of you remain at odds. You must find a way to forgive one another.”

Anakin frowned. “That’s asking a lot,” he replied. “The man apologized to my wife, and yet refused to extend the apology to me,” he told her hotly.

“Perhaps it would be best if the issue of Senator Organa was handled by a more neutral party,” Obi-Wan suggested, seeing how agitated Anakin was becoming.

“Perhaps a meeting could be arranged with the three of us, General Kenobi,” Mothma suggested. “I’m sure once Senator Organa hears of the measures you’re taking to bring peace to the galaxy, he will have a change of heart,” looking at Anakin.

“Perhaps,” Anakin conceded. And then he remembered Leia’s suggestion. “Perhaps I know a way to extend the proverbial olive branch,” he said after a moment’s consideration.

“Oh?” Obi-Wan asked.

Anakin nodded. “I know how distraught Organa’s wife was when I took Leia from them,” he said. “I happened to know of two small children who are in need of a home. Do you think she’d be interested?” he asked Mothma.

Mothma nodded her head. “Both of them will be,” she replied. “Most definitely.”

“Might I suggest that you present that to the viceroy?” Obi-Wan asked Anakin. “Or perhaps to both of them together? I think you’re right, Anakin. I think that this will go a long way towards smoothing over the differences you’ve had with them.”

“Very well,” Anakin agreed. “Is” Queen Brea here on the capital?” he asked Mothma.

“I can certainly find out for you, sir,” she replied.

“Yes, please do that,” Anakin replied. “I suggest that we both get started with some of the smaller items on the list, and then reconvene in a few days’ time to bring one another up to speed.”

“Yes, a good idea,” Mothma replied. “I think we’ve made a very positive start here today,” she added.

“I agree,” Obi-Wan agreed.

Mon Mothma stood up. “I look forward to hearing from you then,” she said. “Give my best to Padmé,” she added.

“I will be sure to do that,” Anakin replied, as he and Obi-Wan stood up. “I’ll be in touch soon.”

Mothma left the room, and Obi-Wan and Anakin sat down again.

“Well I think that went very well,” Obi-Wan said.

“Yes,” Anakin replied, ‘I think so too. I’d like you to take the next meeting,’ he told Obi-Wan. “I’m going to the Death Star to start looking into renovations.”

“Will you go to see Senator Organa first?” Obi-Wan asked.

“I suppose I ought to,” Anakin replied, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. ‘I really hope I can keep my temper with him, though,’ he added. “He just seems to know exactly what to say to piss me off.”

Obi-Wan smiled. “That was before,” he said. “Now that you’re a new man, I’m sure you will have no trouble at all keeping your temper in check.”

Anakin smiled. “Let’s hope so,” he replied. “It wouldn’t do much for the peace talks if I kicked the snot out of him.”

Obi-Wan raised his eyebrows. “Uh... no, no it wouldn’t,” he agreed. “I didn’t get a chance to ask you how your visit on Naboo went,” he said.

“Very well,” Anakin replied. “They’re up at the lake retreat, and I think Padmé is really starting to relax and get the rest she needs.”

“Good,” Obi-Wan replied. “And you’re surviving here without her,” he pointed out.

“Barely,” Anakin replied with a frown. “I hate that we’re apart, but, as I told her, if this is what she needs, then I’m not going to push her to come back before she’s ready.”

Obi-Wan nodded approvingly. “Seems you’ve gained some wisdom after all,” he remarked wryly.

Anakin laughed. “Well, I guess hanging around with you all this time has rubbed off on me,” he remarked.

“Perhaps so,” he replied.

Riema walked into the room at that moment, wondering what the two men had been laughing about.

“Your Majesty, Senator Mothma just contacted me,” she reported. “She wanted me to tell you that Queen Breha is indeed here on Coruscant.”

“Good,” Anakin replied, standing up. “Contact the queen and ask her to meet me at the detention center. I’ll explain everything when she gets there.”

Riema had no idea why the emperor wanted to meet the queen of Alderaan at a detention center, but didn’t question him. “I’ll do so at once sir,” she replied. “Say... one hour?”

“One hour,” Anakin agreed, and Riema left the room to do his bidding.

“This ought to be interesting,” Anakin remarked.

“Yes, undoubtedly,” Obi-Wan replied. “I look forward to hearing all about it when you return.”

Coruscant Detention Centre — one hour later

Breha Organa had been rather alarmed to hear that the emperor himself wanted her to meet him at the detention center, and she began to grow fearful that he was going to incarcerate her along with her husband. But she needn’t have worried, for Anakin was quite civil with her when he arrived shortly after she did.

“I have something I wish to discuss with you and your husband,” Anakin told her, without giving any hint of what it might be.

“Very well,” Breha replied, her nervousness not having been alleviated much. ‘I’ll ask the guards to bring Bail to the visitors’ room,’ she said. “We can wait for him there.”

Anakin nodded. “After you,” he said.

Bail Organa was rather surprised that his wife was there to see him again so soon, for she’d only been there the previous evening. But when he saw that she was not alone, he immediately grew defensive.

“To what do I owe the privilege of this visit?” Bail asked sarcastically as he took a seat across from his wife while Anakin stood.

It took all of Anakin’s self control not to lash out at the man; but he knew that he had to rise above this; he had to be the bigger man. “I’ve come with a proposition for you and your wife,” he said.

Organa frowned, and looked at Breha. “What the hell is this all about, Breha? What has he forced you into?”

“I know as much as you do,” she told him.

“I’ve come here to offer you a chance to start your life again,” Anakin said, addressing Bail. “That is, if you’re not too prejudiced against me to consider it.”

Bail looked at Anakin, seeing the change in him. Breha had told him the previous night about the press conference she’d seen, and Mon Mothma had visited him the previous day to tell him how she was about to start negotiations with Anakin. Organa wouldn’t believe it; he couldn’t believe that the man who had stolen Leia from him had changed. But now, now he had no choice but to believe it.

“What is your proposition?” Breha finally asked, anxious to hear what he had to say.

“Two small children were orphaned recently as a result of an Imperial pursuit of Rebel agents,” Anakin told them. “Their father was killed; their mother had died months earlier. I looked into it, and they have no family to speak of, and have been placed in the custody of the courts.” He stopped for a moment, sensing the shock that both Bail and Breha were feeling. “I was hoping that you could give these younglings a home,” he said. “They are little more than babies,” he continued. “They need parents. You were parents to Leia for ten years. Here is a chance for you to be parents again, if you want it.”

Breha’s eyes had grown wide by this point, and she was looking at Bail with a mixture of disbelief and excitement. “Bail... think of it!” she said.

Bail was thinking of it, and he was shocked that Anakin had even suggested it. “How old are they?” he asked.

“There is a boy who’s just a little over three years old,” Anakin told them, “and a girl who’s almost nineteen months.”

“A girl *and* a boy?” Breha asked excitedly. She looked at her husband. “Bail, this is a wonderful opportunity!” she said.

“Yes, but you’d be raising them alone, Breha,” Bail pointed out. “I’m still in here, remember?”

“If you agree to adopt these younglings you’ll be released,” Anakin said, shocking them yet again. “Children need both parents, Organa.” Bail looked at Anakin, unable to ignore the obvious; Darth Vader was indeed dead, and Anakin Skywalker had returned. “You’d... you’d release me?” he asked.

Anakin nodded. “Yes,” he said. “Believe me; raising two younglings is a two person operation.”

Bail actually smiled at this, and looked at his wife. “Are you up to it, Breha?” he asked. “Two younglings?”

Breha nodded enthusiastically, tears springing to her eyes.

“Then I suppose we’ll do it,” Bail said, looking back at Anakin. He stood up and held out his hand to him. “Thank you, Anakin,” he said.

Anakin shook his hand. “You’re welcome, Senator.”

Anakin did not return home, but rather headed straight for the *Exactor*. He had notified Piett to prepare for departure to the Death Star, and the good captain had prepared to do so as soon as he welcomed Anakin aboard.

“Did you notify Tagge to expect us?” Anakin asked Piett as they left the hangar.

“Yes sir,” Piett replied. “He as somewhat curious about the nature of your visit,” he added.

Anakin nodded. “He’ll know soon enough,” he replied.

Piett said nothing, feeling somewhat disappointed not to have learned anything himself.

Anakin proceeded directly to his quarters, anxious to speak to Padmé. He looked at his wrist chrono, doing a mental calculation of the local time at the lake retreat. Judging it to be still early enough, he sat down at the comm and keyed in the frequency for the house on Lake Varykino. After a few moments, the face of his sister-in-law appeared. *Great*, he thought.

"Hello Sola," he said, being amiable for Padmé's sake. "I didn't realize you were going up to the lake."

Sola lifted her eyebrows. "Oh? I did mention it when you were at my home."

"So you did," Anakin replied awkwardly. 'Is Padmé about? Is she still up?' he asked, having had enough chit chat. "I'd really like to speak with her."

Sola nodded. "Of course," she replied. "I think she's still up. I'll go look for her."

Anakin waited a few moments and then smiled as Padmé appeared on the screen.

"Hi," she said with a smile. "I was hoping to hear from you tonight."

"I told you I would," he reminded her. "I couldn't wait to talk to you. How are you feeling?"

"A little tired," she replied, "but otherwise okay. How did your meeting with Mon Mothma go?" she asked.

"Very well," he told her. "I think we made some real progress today."

Padmé smiled. "That's wonderful," she said. "Tell me all about it."

Anakin went on to tell her all about his meeting with Mon Mothma, including how receptive she'd been to Padmé's idea about the Death Star. Padmé was very pleased to hear it.

"In fact, I'm on the Death Star right now," he told her. "I'm going to brief my officers here about my plans, and try to come up with some ideas for renovating it."

"I'm so excited," she told him with a smile. "And so happy that you've decided to use my idea."

"I had another interesting meeting today," he told her. "I spoke to Bail and Brea Organa today."

"Really?" she asked, almost afraid to ask how things had gone.

"Yes," he replied. 'I told them about the orphaned children,' he continued. "I told Organa that if he and his wife adopted them that I would release him."

Padmé's eyes opened wide. "You did??" she asked in amazement.

Anakin nodded.

"Bail must have been quite surprised," she said.

"He was shocked," Anakin agreed. "But in the end he agreed to do it. I think things are going to go a lot smoother now between Senator Organa and me."

Padmé smiled. "Ani, I'm so proud of you," she said. "You have no idea how much all of this means to me."

I'm doing it for you, Angel, don't you see? He thought. "I think I know," he said at last. 'It's late,' he said. "You ought to get to bed."

Padmé nodded, not arguing the point. "When are you coming to see us again?" she asked.

Her question made Anakin's heart sing. "Just as soon as I can," he told her. "I promise."

"Okay," she said. "I love you."

"I love you too," he replied. "Have a good sleep."

"Goodnight Anakin."

"Goodnight Angel. Sweet dreams."

Chapter 119

One hundred nineteen

Coruscant

“Ah, there you are Riema,” Obi-Wan said as he entered the office.

“Can I help you with something?” she asked.

“I just wanted to let you know that I’m going over to the Jedi Temple,” he told her. He frowned. “It won’t be easy returning there.”

Riema nodded. “I’m sure,” she said. “Will Master Yoda go with you?” she asked.

“Yes,” Obi-Wan replied. “He’s not looking forward to it either, I can tell,” he told her.

“No doubt there are a lot of bad memories there for both of you,” she said.

Obi-Wan nodded. “Yes, very bad memories,” he replied quietly.

“You’re a good friend to do this for the emperor,” she told him. ‘And a very brave one.’ Obi-Wan smiled. “You’re too kind,” he said.

“Do you want me to come along?” she asked. “You know, to....take notes on what needs to be done there?”

Obi-Wan could sense that she was concerned about him, and it made him wonder if there was more to her consideration. The thought of it brought a blush to his cheek. “I *could* use some assistance, actually,” he replied. “Thank you.”

Riema smiled. “Not at all,” she said. “Shall we, then?”

Obi-Wan nodded. “Yes, it’s time to get this over with.”

Death Star

The officers on board the Death Star were rather curious about the meeting that that emperor had called. No one knew quite what to expect, and they were all discussing it amongst themselves when Anakin entered the room, flanked by two clones.

“Gentlemen,” he said, taking a seat at the head of the table. ‘You’re no doubt wondering why I called this meeting. What I have to say will probably come as a surprise to you all.’ He stopped for a moment to gather his thoughts before continuing. “I have decided to decommission this space station. No... not decommission, *re*commission.”

The men looked at one another in bewilderment, none of them knowing what he was talking about.

“Excuse me sir,” Tagge spoke up finally, “but I don’t think any of us quite understand what you mean.”

"I mean that this station is to be disarmed," Anakin explained. "I have begun negotiations with the Rebel Alliance, and this station as it is represents a huge road block in those negotiations. I mean to turn this station into something useful, something productive. And that means it will be refurbished, the armaments removed, its purpose changed."

"Sir, do you have any idea what such an undertaking would entail?" one officer spoke up. "It has taken a decade to put this station together, at a tremendous cost."

"I know exactly how much work was put into this station," Anakin replied. "I was there every step of the way, remember? And as for money, the way I see it, Palpatine's fortune is blood money. And there's more than enough of it to cover the costs involved in this project."

None of the officers said anything, for they knew him well enough, even now, than to question him. He could sense their doubts, however, and it concerned him.

"Palpatine conceived the idea for the Death Star years before the Empire was even created," Anakin continued. "It was his goal to bully the galaxy into submission by using this station, holding it over their heads to force them into doing whatever he asked. That is extortion, gentlemen, and I will have no part of that as emperor. The galaxy I envision is not built on the oppression of other worlds. I was a slave once, and I won't allow any being in this galaxy to be treated as one in order to line the pockets of those who would deem themselves superior. The Death Star embodies everything that made this Empire evil, it embodies Palpatine. And so long as it remains a weapon of mass destruction, his influence will forever be felt by all of us. I for one want to exorcise him from this galaxy forever. Therefore, this station will be recommissioned into a research station and renamed to convey its new purpose. Any one who disagrees, well that's just too damn bad. I'm the emperor now, and this is my decision to make." He stopped for a moment to let this sink in. "Any questions?"

"What about us, sir?" Tagge asked. "We're all military men. What will become of us? Of our jobs?"

"A good question," Anakin replied. "Those of you who have the most seniority will remain in the services," he explained. "The role of the military will undoubtedly change, but a certain military force will still be required. The rest will be retrained to work in this facility or elsewhere in the Empire. I have recently removed a number of people from their posts; those jobs will need to be filled. Rest assured there will be a place for you, gentlemen; I have no intention of leaving you out to dry."

The relief felt by the assembled officers was almost palpable, and they relaxed visibly.

"Tagge, you will remain in command of this station," Anakin continued. "You have earned that distinction with your impeccable service record as well as your loyalty to me personally."

Tagge was gratified. "Thank you sir," he said. "I won't let you down."

"I know you won't," Anakin replied. He looked around the table. "We have a lot of work to do," he told them men. "I want a plan of attack put together and ready to move upon in twenty-four hours. Is that clear to everyone?"

Each of the officers responded in the affirmative.

“Good,” Anakin replied. “I’m going to get started on the weapons array. I’d like to be the one to pull the plug on it.”

No one was about to deny him that privilege.

Coruscant — Jedi Temple

It was with great trepidation that Obi-Wan walked up the great staircase that lead to the Jedi Temple. It had been more than a decade since anyone had set foot in the building, and yet Obi-Wan was certain that the ghosts of the hundreds of Jedi slain there would be felt everywhere within.

Yoda too approached the great edifice with mixed emotions. For while both Jedi were excited at the prospect of resurrecting the Order, both also felt anxious about facing the dreadful events that had marked the end of that Order.

“A new beginning this is,” Yoda reminded Obi-Wan, sensing his friend’s tremendous apprehension about entering the building. ‘The rebirth of the Jedi.’ Obi-Wan nodded, trying to take courage from Yoda’s words. But the images of the slain Jedi, the slaughtered younglings would not leave his mind. “I know, Master Yoda,” he said. “I’m ready.”

Riema, though not Force sensitive, could see how difficult this was for Obi-Wan. His courage impressed her; but his sensitivity touched her heart. She wanted to reach out to him, to show him how much she admired him; but felt unsure if it was appropriate for her to do so under the present circumstances. *And he’s a Jedi, remember? She told herself. The Jedi don’t have emotional attachments... but the emperor is married, and he’s a Jedi...* she reminded herself. Remembering that she was in the presence of two beings who could easily read her mind, Riema pushed the thoughts from her mind, and focused on doing what she could to help Obi-Wan through this challenging task.

Death Star

“It’s good to see you again, Sir,” Captain Rex said as he met up with Anakin on the weapons deck.

“You too, Rex,” Anakin replied. “I trust you’ve been keeping busy here?”

Rex smiled. “You know me, sir,” he responded. “I like to keep involved.”

Anakin laughed. “Yes, that’s one way of putting it.”

“So what will we be doing exactly, sir?” Rex asked as Anakin opened the tool box he’d taken out of a nearby closet.

“We’re dismantling the weapons’ array,” Anakin told him.

Rex looked at him. “Dismantle the weapons?” he asked.

Anakin nodded as he examined the control panel in front of him. “It will have to be done in stages of course,” he replied. “But this is where we start.”

“I guess I should have asked why, sir,” Rex replied. “Why are we doing this?”

Anakin looked at him. “You weren’t at the meeting,” he remembered, and then proceeded to tell Rex about the plans he had for the Death Star and the galaxy.

“So you see,” Anakin concluded, “having this station able to destroy an entire planet is rather contrary to our goal of achieving peace.”

Rex nodded. “I can see that,” he replied, assisting Anakin who was removing the metal plate over the control panel. He was silent for a moment. “May I ask you something, sir?” he asked.

“Hand me that spanner, will you?” Anakin said. “What’s your question?”

Rex handed him the tool. “What’s going to happen to us, sir? To the clones?”

Anakin looked at him. “What do you mean?”

“Well, if there’s no more Rebellion, there’s no more war. And if there’s no more war then there’s no more need for an army. And... well, where does that leave us?”

Anakin was thoughtful for a moment, not really having thought this out. But there were millions of clones throughout the galaxy; their fate needed to be considered.

“We will still need a military,” Anakin pointed out to him. ‘Not in the same extent that we have now,’ he added. “We will also need police forces to keep the peace and enforce laws throughout the galaxy,” he added. “Don’t worry, Rex,” he concluded. “There will be a place for the clones in the galaxy, I promise you.”

Rex nodded, satisfied that he could trust Anakin at his word.

Jedi Temple— Coruscant

Yoda, Obi-Wan and Riema walked along the empty corridors, the silence oppressive. Although all evidence of the slaughter that had taken place here had long since been removed, the ghosts of the slain Jedi seemed to be everywhere. It took all of Obi-Wan’s considerable control not to break down as the memories of that horrible day flooded back to him.

“Looks like we have a lot of work to do,” he said, forcing himself to remain detached. ‘Some structural damage,’ he said to Riema, who took notes as he spoke, “the floor is damaged in some spots. I think an overhaul of the interior is in order, wouldn’t you say, Master Yoda?”

Yoda was not unaffected by the building, and he said nothing in response as he continued on his way to the nursery. *No, not there, please don’t go in there*, Obi-Wan pleaded silently, knowing his resolve to remain strong wouldn’t hold if he followed.

“Let’s check the environmental controls, shall we?” he said to Riema instead.

Yoda turned to Obi-Wan, sensing how difficult this was for him. “Obi-Wan, we must,” he said simply.

Obi-Wan frowned, and then looked back at the diminutive Jedi. “I know,” he said quietly. “I’m just not sure I can,” he admitted.

Riema’s heart went out to him, and she put her hand on his arm. “I’ll come too,” she said.

Obi-Wan looked at her, trying to take some of her strength as his own. She too knew loss; she was no stranger to grief. "Very well," he said, trying to remain calm. "Let's go."

Death Star

"Ani, have you had any sleep since you've been there?" Padmé asked, seeing the fatigue in his eyes.

"I don't have time for sleep right now," he told her. "There's so much to do, Angel. I want to do it all at once."

"And all yourself, no doubt," she added.

Anakin smiled. "You know what a perfectionist I tend to be," he remarked.

"All too well," she replied with a smile. 'Don't you have technicians to do all that?' "Of course," he replied. "The place is swarming with them," he added. "But I need to make sure they're doing things right," he concluded.

Padmé laughed. "I see," she added. 'So when will you be back to see us?' she asked. "Sounds like you're pretty tied up with the renovations."

"I am," he said. "But that doesn't mean I won't make the time for you and the kids."

Padmé smiled "I'm glad to hear that," she said. 'Because they have a party at school in a few days,' she told him. "It's the end of the year celebration," she explained. "And I promised them I'd find a way for them to go. I don't think I'm up to it right now, Ani," she told him. "I'm feeling absolutely wretched these days."

Anakin frowned. "Isn't there something you can take for that?" he asked.

"Sola is going to get me something," she told him. "She went back to Theed earlier today. So hopefully this won't be for long that I'm feeling this way."

"Let's hope not," Anakin agreed. 'I can bring them here for the party,' he told her. "When is it again?"

"In five days," she said. "It would mean so much to them, Ani. And to me."

"Then I will make sure I'm there on time," he told her. "Not like the last party," he added.

Padmé smiled. "That's all forgotten now," she told him.

Anakin was very happy to hear it. "I'll come the day after tomorrow," he told her. "That way we can have a visit before I have to take the kids to Coruscant."

"Sounds wonderful," she replied. 'I can't wait to see you,' she added. "I miss you."

"I miss you too, Angel," he replied. "I'll see you soon."

Chapter 120

One hundred twenty

Coruscant

Obi-Wan sat down at the comm in Anakin's office, happy to be home. He knew that Anakin was waiting for the report about the Jedi Temple, and he himself was anxious to find out how things were going on board the Death Star.

"Good morning Obi-Wan," Anakin said when he finally appeared at the comm.. He sported a few days' growth of beard on his face, and Obi-Wan smiled.

"You're looking rather... disheveled," Obi-Wan commented, "if you don't mind me saying so."

Anakin laughed. "I guess maybe it's time for a shave," he admitted, rubbing his chin.

"I take it you've been busy," Obi-Wan said.

"Yes, very busy," Anakin replied. "Things are really going well," he said.

"That's good news," Obi-Wan replied. "Your plans are working?"

"Yes, they're being put into motion right now," Anakin replied. "The place is swarming with technicians and engineers. It's only a matter of time before we can introduce this new station to the galaxy."

"Does Padmé know about the progress you've made?" Obi-Wan asked.

"I spoke to her last night," he told him. "She's thrilled," he added with a smile.

"I'm sure," Obi-Wan replied. "Did she give you any idea when she might be coming home?"

"No," Anakin replied. "But I don't think it will be long now. She's asked me to bring the kids to Coruscant for an end of the year party, so I'll be going to Naboo tomorrow."

Obi-Wan nodded. "That will mean a lot to Luke and Leia," he remarked.

"Well I have a lot to make up for," Anakin reminded him.

"I suppose so," Obi-Wan agreed.

"How did things go at the temple?" Anakin asked.

"It wasn't easy," Obi-Wan told him. "But we got through it. The building needs a lot of work if we're to use it again. Riema came along and took notes."

"Good," Anakin replied, glad that he wasn't there for that particular visit. "Tell her to hire whatever contractors are needed to start the renovations right away," he continued.

"I'll do that," Obi-Wan replied. 'Anything else?'
"Not that I can think of," Anakin replied. "How are things between you and Riema?" he asked with a smile, taking Obi-Wan totally off guard.

"I beg your pardon?" Obi-Wan asked.

"You heard me," Anakin replied. "Don't try to tell me that you don't have feelings for the woman because I know better."

Obi-Wan felt his face grow warm. "Even if that were true, and I'm not saying it is, it would mean nothing."

"Don't tell me you're still clinging to that out-dated Code," Anakin replied. "The days of celibacy are gone, Obi-Wan. I think you're missing out on a great opportunity for happiness if you pass up this chance with her."

Obi-Wan said nothing in response, though Anakin's words had certainly struck a chord with him. "So when can we expect you back here?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Three days from now," Anakin replied.

"Very well," Obi-Wan replied. "I'll talk to you then."

A few days later

"Dad!" the twins shouted as they saw their father stepping onto the pier. They ran down the stairs to meet him as Padmé remained above, enjoying the warm afternoon sunshine.

Anakin smiled as Luke and Leia tackled him with hugs and kisses. "How are you two?" he asked. 'Behaving yourselves?'

"Don't we always?" Leia asked, remembering their favorite joke.

"Do you want me to answer that?" Anakin replied, remembering his part.

Leia giggled, and hugged her father again. "I'm so glad you're here," she said.

"So am I," Anakin replied. 'Where's your mother?'

"On the terrace," Luke told him as they started up the stairs. "She's been feeling pretty rotten."

Anakin nodded. "I know," he said. "Didn't your aunt bring her something?"

"She hasn't come back yet," Leia replied. "We thought you were her when we heard that the gondola was on its way."

"Your mother told me about the party at school tomorrow," Anakin told them. "I figured you might want to go," he told them with a smile.

Luke and Leia stopped and looked at each other, and then at him. "You mean you're taking us to the party?" Luke asked.

"If you want to go," Anakin replied casually. "If not, that's okay, I'm sure that..."

"We want to go!" the twins replied in unison.

Anakin laughed. "I thought you might," he said as they reached the terrace.

At dinner that night

"It sounds like you've been very busy," Padmé commented as Anakin finished telling her and the children about the renovations at the Death Star.

"Yes, but it's been very productive," he agreed. "I'm quite pleased with how receptive the men have been to the changes I'm making," he told them.

"Well you fired all the trouble makers, remember Dad?" Luke remarked.

Anakin laughed. "Yes, that's true," he replied. "Makes things easier when you do it that way," he added.

Luke smiled. "I bet."

"So when is Sola returning?" Anakin asked. "I don't like the thought of leaving you alone up here."

"I won't be alone," Padmé replied. "Han is here, remember?"

"Ah yes," Anakin remembered. "Still, I was hoping you'd be feeling better by now. Didn't you tell me she was going to bring you some meds?"

"Yes, she is," Padmé replied. "She was delayed, and said she'd be up sometime tonight or tomorrow morning."

"Good," Anakin replied. He looked at the twins. "You two all ready to go to the big party?"

"Oh yeah," Luke replied with a smile. "I've been saving up stomach space for days so I can eat more junk."

"Your stomach is like a bottomless pit, Luke," Leia remarked. "There's no way you'd run out of space."

"Sounds like somebody else I know," Padmé commented with a smile.

Anakin laughed.

Coruscant

It was evening, and Riema had just put her children to bed. She wasn't quite ready to go to bed herself yet, and so she wandered into the main part of the house, looking for some company.

Obi-Wan was just about to take a stroll in the gardens when he sensed Riema's presence nearby. Anakin's words came to his mind as he wrestled with indecision. *Should I invite her to come for a walk with me?* He wondered. *Jedi are not supposed to have emotional attachments*, he reminded himself, stopping in his tracks. He frowned, hating the fact that he couldn't decide upon a logical course of action. *But there is no logic to the feelings you have for this woman*, he told himself. *There is no Jedi methodology to fall back on in this situation... you're on your own old man.*

"Good evening Obi-Wan," Riema said as she appeared on the terrace. "It's quite warm outside tonight," she added, walking over to the railing.

Obi-Wan was almost paralyzed by this point, his emotions making him more anxious than he'd ever been. "Yes, yes it is," he replied. He swallowed, his mouth suddenly having gone dry. 'I was just about to take a walk through the gardens,' he told her. "Would you... would you..."

"I'd love to join you," she said with a smile. "Thank you."

Naboo — later that night

"Are the kids asleep?"

Anakin laughed. "Asleep? No. They're in bed, but I think it will be a while before they fall asleep."

Padmé smiled. "They're so excited about the party tomorrow," she said.

Anakin nodded as he sat on the edge of the bed to remove his boots. "That's an understatement," he said with a smile.

Padmé laughed as she continued to brush her hair. "So have you given any thought to names for this new space station?" she asked.

"No," Anakin told her as he pulled off his tunic. "Any ideas?"

"One," she told him as she set down her brush. "Discovery."

Anakin nodded as he mulled this over. "Discovery Research station?"

"Something like that," she said as she climbed into the bed.

"That works for me," he said, standing up to remove his trousers. "Anything is better than Death Star," he added.

Padmé nodded, admiring his body as he undressed, wishing she felt better.

Anakin could sense how she felt, however, and as much as he wanted to make love to her, knew better than to try and initiate anything. He climbed into bed beside her and turned to face her. "Still feeling rough, aren't you?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied. "I'm sorry," she added.

Anakin frowned. "Don't apologize," he told her. "You're carrying my babies, Padmé. I just wish there was something I could do to make you feel better."

Padmé smiled as she cuddled up to him. "Just hold me, Ani," she told him. "Let me fall asleep in your arms."

Anakin kissed the top of her head as he wrapped his arms around her. "That I can do," he told her, closing his eyes. He was exhausted after the past few days of almost nonstop working, and it wasn't long before he was asleep, Padmé nestled in his arms.

The next morning

Luke and Leia could barely contain their excitement at breakfast, and needed repeated reminders to eat their meal.

"I can't wait to see everybody," Leia said excitedly. "Won't they be surprised when we show up?"

Luke nodded. "I can't wait to see the look on their faces," he grinned.

Anakin was only half listening to them, for he was more concerned that Padmé was still not at the table. He realized that morning sickness was a part of early pregnancy; but having been away at the war when Padmé had gone through this stage with Luke and Leia, this was still very new to him. New and unnerving; and it made him wonder how he would manage to stand seeing her in labor.

"Good morning sir," Han said as he joined Anakin and the twins at the table.

"Morning Han," Anakin replied.

"So the big party is tomorrow," Han said as he took a seat. 'Are you sure you guys want to go?' he teased. "It's probably gonna be boring."

"No way this is gonna be boring," Luke declared.

"And yes we're sure we want to go," Leia added for good measure.

Anakin smiled. "There's no sense trying to talk them out of it, Han," he said. "Their minds are made up."

The sound of footsteps was heard on the terrace, and before long Sola appeared.

"Good morning everyone," she said, not at all surprised to see Anakin there.

"Hi Aunt Sola," the twins said.

"Hello Sola," Anakin said, standing up.

"Hello Anakin," Sola replied. "Where's Padmé?"

"She's not feeling well this morning," Anakin told her. "I'm hoping you can help her out with that."

"I can," Sola said. "I'll go bring her these meds right now," she added, and then left the room to go find Padmé.

"Mom's not going to be sick the whole time she's pregnant, is she Dad?" Leia asked worriedly.

"It's my understanding that it's only for the first few months," Anakin replied, sitting down again.

"Was she like this with us?" Luke asked.

"Regretfully I wasn't around at the beginning of her pregnancy," Anakin told him. "I was off at the war. I didn't find out about the two of you until she was quite far along."

"These babies are going to be so lucky to have both you and Mom with them from the start," Leia said, feeling a stab of jealousy. "I wish we'd been with you too," she added.

Anakin sighed. "If I could change the past I would," he assured her. "But there's nothing to be done about it now, Leia. All we can do is live for today and look forward to the future."

“And the future is the party,” Luke piped up with a smile.

Anakin smiled. “Yes, and if you don’t eat your breakfast we won’t be leaving until noon,” he said. “So eat up, both of you.”

An hour later

“Are you sure you’re feeling okay? You’re not just saying that to get rid of me?”

Padmé laughed. “Would I do that?” she asked. “Besides, you always know when I’m lying anyway,” she reminded him.

“Well, most of the time,” Anakin replied. ‘Those meds kicked in pretty quickly,’ he remarked. “You were pale as a ghost two hours ago.”

Padmé nodded. “I know, they’re remarkable,” she said. “I can’t tell you what a relief it is to feel better after the past few days I’ve had.”

“I know,” he said, taking her by the arms. “Too bad she didn’t bring them by yesterday,” he commented with a smile.

Padmé laughed again. “You are truly insatiable, you know that?”

Anakin grinned. “I know,” he said. ‘I’ll be back with the kids tomorrow night,’ he told her, hugging her close. “Get plenty of sleep while they’re gone because you won’t get much when I bring them back.”

“Are you kidding? They sleep until noon if I let them,” she said.

“I wasn’t referring to them,” he told her.

Padmé felt her face grow warm as she understood his meaning. “In that case, I’ll look forward to your return more than usual,” she told him.

Anakin smiled.

“Come on, Dad! The boat’s here!”

Anakin pulled back. “Guess I’d better go,” he said.

Padmé nodded. “Have fun,” she said with a smile.

Anakin laughed. “Yes, I’m sure to have plenty of that,” he said. He kissed her softly. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” she replied. “See you tomorrow night.”

Chapter 121

One hundred twenty-one

Coruscant — Veslack Academy

It was a day of celebration as the students and faculty of the school gathered together to mark the end of the cycle. Being a small school, with classes no more than fifteen children each, they were able to make use of the large garden area for the festivities, with each class having their own area to celebrate in.

Luke and Leia were greeted with great enthusiasm and surprise by both their teachers and their classmates, and soon they were involved in the games and enjoying the bountiful treats that the school staff had provided.

A section of the garden had been reserved for parents, and Anakin made his way there once he'd ensured that the twins were having a good time.

"Your majesty, this is an honour," Administrator Jeslow gushed as he saw Anakin enter the pavilion.

Anakin put his hand up. "Please, right now I'm just Luke and Leia's father," he told him. "Not the emperor."

Jeslow was somewhat surprised by Anakin's words, and simply shook his hand. "It's good to see you," he said. "The twins have been missed."

"Well they've certainly missed this place," Anakin said. "Which is a credit to you and your staff, Administrator."

Jeslow smiled, deeply gratified by Anakin's praise. "I'm deeply honoured, sir."

"Your majesty, it's good to see you," Miss Zadane said as she joined Anakin and Jeslow.

"Hello Miss Zadane," Anakin said. "I'm glad I could be here. The twins wouldn't have missed this for anything."

"How is the empress?" she asked. "I understand she's been visiting family on Naboo with the twins."

Anakin nodded. "Yes, she's expecting, actually," he said with a smile. "And consequently feeling quite poorly right now. She wanted to get some rest, and being the wife of the emperor here wasn't exactly affording her the rest she needed."

"How exciting," Miss Zadane replied. "Another Skywalker on the way. Luke and Leia must be thrilled."

"Two new Skywalkers," Anakin told her. "Padmé is expecting twins. So in a few years you'll have two new additions to your student body."

"They'll be most welcome," Jeslow said. "Congratulations, that is splendid news."

Anakin smiled. "Yes it certainly is."

It was strange at first for Anakin to converse with other parents simply as another parent; but the longer he did so, the more comfortable he felt. Comparing parenting stories, frustrations and triumphs made him feel as though he were, after all, doing a pretty good job. And it brought to mind something that Padmé had said to him weeks earlier, about how he needed to choose between being emperor or being a father to Luke and Leia. And right now, as he watched his children laughing and enjoying themselves with their friends, he knew that there was one easy answer to that question.

For Anakin, being emperor was grand, but there was nothing that could replace the feeling of knowing that there were two individuals in the galaxy who were a part of him, a part of the person he loved more than life itself. Luke and Leia represented the best part of him, he reflected; they'd shown him the way out of the darkness, and made him believe that there was more to him than the monster that Palpatine had fashioned on that dreadful day eleven years ago. *And now you have the chance to be a father all over again, from day one*, he realized. *I can see them take their first steps, hear their first words, even change their diapers*, he thought with a smile. *All because I happened to be there at that meeting... all because Owen Lars happened to take a wrong turn... Fate certainly is a mysterious and wondrous thing...*

Later that same day

Anakin sat in the passenger lounge of the yacht as they made their way back to Naboo. Leia had her head resting on his lap. She had fallen asleep almost immediately after take off, and was simply enjoying a nice snooze using her father as a pillow. Luke wasn't far off, stretched out on one of the other seats across from Anakin. He'd been talking almost nonstop since take off, and Anakin was having a hard time not laughing at his son's exuberance.

"Dad, are we going to come home soon do you think?" Luke asked, stifling a yawn.

"I think so," Anakin said, playing with the end of one of Leia's braids. "Things will be settling down soon."

"You and Mom aren't fighting anymore," Luke pointed out.

"No, we're getting on much better now," Anakin said. "I guess it took a good swift kick in the pants for me to realize what a jerk I was being."

Luke grinned. "That's funny," he yawned. 'Dad, when I grow up, I want to be just like you,' he said as his eyes drifted closed. "Except... I'd be shorter."

Anakin smiled, tears springing to his eyes at his son's words. "Sleep well my son," said, using the Force to bring the blanket up over Luke's body. He leaned his head back against the bulkhead and closed his eyes, feeling more contented than he had in a very long time.

Naboo— later that night

Padmé had tried to stay awake, knowing that Anakin and the twins would be arriving home soon; but she was too tired and eventually fell asleep on the couch in front of the fireplace. She didn't hear them enter the house, or the twins stumble down the corridor to their beds. Nor did she hear when Anakin entered the sitting room and close the door behind him. But when he planted a soft kiss on her cheek, she smiled and opened her eyes.

"Hi," she said sleepily. "What time is it?"

"It's very late," he told her, sitting on the edge of the couch beside her. "Why aren't you in bed?"

"I was trying to wait up for you," she told him. "Guess I didn't quite make it."

"Not quite," he told her, brushing her hair from her face.

"Did the kids have fun?" she asked.

Anakin nodded. "Luke ate like a wookiee," he informed her with a smile. "Chip off the old block."

Padmé smiled. "Yes, in more ways than one."

"It was nice being there today," he told her. "Just as Luke and Leia's father, not as the emperor or anyone special. I liked feeling that way. It made me realize that being their father is far more important than being the emperor. I was a fool to think anything could be more important."

Padmé was immensely pleased to hear this. "Let's go to bed, Ani," she said, sitting up with his help.

"Tired?" he asked, holding her hand as she stood up.

Padmé smiled. "Not any more," she told him.

Anakin smiled, and they left the room together hand in hand.

Coruscant

"Welcome Senators," Obi-Wan said as Mon Mothma and Bail Organa entered the conference room. "It's good to see you both," he added, looking at Organa.

Bail smiled, the freedom he'd unexpectedly been given having given him a fresh outlook on life. "It's good to see you too, Obi-Wan," he said.

"I understand you and your wife are new parents," Obi-Wan said as they sat down.

Bail's smile grew. "Yes, we've recently adopted two younglings who were orphaned.

"How exciting for you," Mothma smiled. "How are they adjusting?"

"It's been a little rough, I won't lie," Bail said. "Many sleepless nights; but it's all worth it. Breha's so happy... I'm just so grateful to Anakin for doing this for us. He really has changed."

Obi-Wan nodded. "Indeed he has," he agreed. "He'd be here himself but he's on board the new space station seeing to some final details before the grand unveiling."

"The Death Star has died," Mothma remarked with a smile. "If only Palpatine were alive to see his beloved space station stripped of its teeth."

Bail nodded. "I have to admit, I never thought I'd see the day when this would happen. It's made all the difference in these negotiations."

“Absolutely,” Obi-Wan agreed. ‘I’ve had Riema draw up a treaty,’ he said, picking up a data disc. “It’s still in the preliminary stages, but I thought perhaps the three of us could knock about a few ideas to finalize it. This will make things official.”

“A cease fire,” Mothma said, shaking her head. “How long have we prayed for this day?”

“More than eleven years,” Bail said, taking the disc from Obi-Wan. “And it never would have happened at all if it weren’t for Anakin Skywalker.”

“Just think, if he hadn’t come to that meeting and seen Leia,” Bail said, “things may not have turned out the way they did.”

“The Force works in mysterious ways,” Obi-Wan remarked. “And it ordained that Anakin would be given a second chance. I’m quite certain that he won’t abuse it.”

Space Station Discovery (formerly known as the Death Star)

Each time that Anakin left Naboo, he felt more hopeful for the future. Padmé was feeling better, and things were going far more smoothly at the Death Star than he had anticipated. In fact, the grand unveiling of the new Discovery Research Station was scheduled for the end of the week. A peace treaty had been drawn up between the Alliance and the Empire.

“Sir, here is the schedule for the unveiling,” Tagge said, handing Anakin a datapad. “My assistant put it together,” he added.

Anakin nodded, remembering how his own assistant had been commandeered by his best friend. *And now they’re a serious item*, he mused to himself. He looked over the schedule, nodding approvingly.

“Invitations have been sent out to the members of the senate,” Tagge told him.

“Excellent,” Anakin replied. ‘This looks fine,’ he said. *Fine, but not perfect...* “Set course for Coruscant,” he told Tagge. “Maximum velocity.”

“Right away sir.”

Hours later

Anakin entered his home, a place he’d seen precious little of in the past few weeks. He heard the sound of children’s laughter, and for a brief moment, thought that Luke and Leia were home. But then he realized that it was Riema’s children he heard.

“Welcome home sir,” Riema said as she, Obi-Wan and the two girls entered the foyer.

“Thanks,” Anakin replied. “Everything is all set for tomorrow,” he told them.

“You mean the space station is in orbit now?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Yes it is,” Anakin replied. “We arrived an hour ago.”

“General Tagge’s assistant sent me a copy of the itinerary, sir,” Riema said. “It looks like quite a grand affair.”

Anakin smiled. “Well, this marks the beginning of a new era,” he told them. ‘The way I see it, the space station is like a microcosm of the galaxy,’ he continued. “Its transformation has mirrored that of the galaxy, and of mine too I suppose.”

Obi-Wan smiled. “An excellent analogy,” he said. “And quite correct I think. And with the temple now nearing completion, the galaxy’s restoration will be complete very soon.”

Anakin nodded. “Yes, everything is going as planned,” he said. ‘If only Padmé was here to see it,’ he added, a hint of sadness passing through his eyes. He ran a hand through his hair. “Oh well, she’ll be home soon enough, right?”

“I’m certain of it,” Obi-Wan replied.

“Yes, so am I,” Anakin agreed. ‘I’m...I’m going up to my room,’ he said. “I’m pretty beat.”

“Goodnight sir,” Riema said. “Have a good rest.”

Anakin headed upstairs, and then stopped as a thought struck him. Instead of going to his own room, he headed down the hall way, to the large room that he was in the process of renovating. The lights turned on as he stepped into the room, and Anakin smiled as he beheld his handiwork.

Two cribs sat side by side, each of them hand made by him. To match the cribs he’d also fashioned a large wardrobe to hold the babies’ clothing and necessities. The first coat of paint was dry, a neutral colour at this point since he hadn’t figured out yet what gender the twins were. He was confident that he would soon, and so the finishing touches of the room would be left until such time as he did. Anakin smiled, imagining how surprised Padmé would be that he’d done all this in her absence. The fact that he’d made everything himself would, he hoped, let her know how committed he was to their family. He never wanted her to have any doubts about that ever again.

It was very late when Anakin went to bed. Tomorrow would be a big day; the biggest day of Anakin’s reign as emperor yet. It would mark the end of the influence of Palpatine, and the beginning of what he hoped would be a new era of peace. *And then my family will finally be safe*, he thought as he drifted off to sleep; *then perhaps I will finally have atoned for my crimes... perhaps...*

Chapter 122

One hundred twenty-two

Coruscant

Anakin awoke early the next morning, a sense of excitement and expectation filling him. He'd entertained a slim hope that he would wake up to find Padmé in the bed with him; but those hopes evaporated upon realizing that he was as alone as he'd been when he'd fallen asleep the previous night. Deciding that he was not going to dwell on this, Anakin arose to start what was bound to be a very busy day.

"You're looking very handsome this morning, sir," Riema commented as Anakin joined her and Obi-Wan at breakfast.

Anakin smiled. "Thank you," he said. "Amazing what a shave will do for a man," he remarked as he sat down.

Obi-Wan smiled. "Is that a hint?" he asked, stroking his beard.

Anakin laughed. "Not at all," he replied.

"I should hope not," Riema commented. "You're so distinguished looking with your beard," she told Obi-Wan.

Anakin looked at Obi-Wan, surprised by her comment, and had to stifle a laugh at the redness that had crept up Obi-Wan's neck.

"So I suppose it won't be long before the Temple will be having a grand new reopening," Obi-Wan said, changing the subject.

"Yes, that will be an grand day indeed," Anakin replied. He looked at his wrist chrono, seeing that the hour had almost come. *And Padmé isn't here*, he remembered with disappointment. 'I'd better get over the Senate building,' he told them. "I'll see you there."

The enormous mall behind the senate building was full of people, the balcony of the building itself jammed with dignitaries as the moment drew closer for the celebration to begin.

"Good morning Senator," Anakin said, coming up behind Mon Mothma. She turned to him with a smile.

"Good morning," she said. "This is quite a spectacular turn out, isn't it?"

Anakin nodded, looking at the large crowd that had gathered below. "Yes it is," he said.

Bail Organa stepped over to them at this point, looking happier than he'd looked in months. He extended a hand to Anakin in greeting.

"How's the new family?" Anakin asked.

Bail smiled. “Wonderful,” he said. “They’re keeping us busy, making a mess of every room, squabbling... it’s heaven,” he added.

Anakin laughed. “Yes, that sounds about right,” he said.

“I understand you have another one on the way,” Bail said.

“Another two,” Anakin replied.

“Oh my,” Mothma said. “That will keep you two busy,” she commented with a smile.

Anakin smiled. “I know, I can’t wait,” he replied.

A fanfare was heard, and Anakin knew that it was time. Suddenly the thought of addressing the thousands of people below unnerved him, and he felt his heart starting to race.

“Looks like it’s time,” he commented to his companions, and then stepped away to approach the podium that had been set up at the balcony’s edge. The crowd gathered below cheered when they saw him, surprising Anakin with their enthusiasm. It made him realize that all his efforts to better the galaxy had not gone unnoticed, and that made them well worth it.

Anakin held up a hand up to silence the crowd after a few moments, and after a few more boisterous moments, the crowd fell silent. Anakin moved close to the voice amplifier so that he could be heard by all.

“Citizens of the Empire,” he began. “Today marks the beginning of a new era in the galaxy. The late emperor and creator of the Empire, Palpatine, began construction on a super weapon, a mighty space station that was designed to keep the galaxy in thrall under the threat of its deadly weaponry. This station, aptly named the Death Star, was built in secret, meant to be sprung upon the galaxy as a means to destroy those who dared to oppose his draconian rule. Times have changed since the demise of Palpatine. This very day a ceasefire will be signed between the Alliance and the Empire,” he continued. “To underscore my commitment to this new peace, I have transformed the greatest symbol of tyranny that Palpatine created, the dreaded Death Star, into a facility that can be used for all, a research station to serve all people of the galaxy.”

Applause burst forth from the crowd below. Anakin waited for it to die down before continuing. “And so I give you, Discovery,” he said, giving a signal to one of his men. Above in the Coruscant morning sky the enormous orb that had once been the Death Star came into view, and the crowd below were silent in awe as they beheld it. And then the applause began again, accompanied by cheers of approval.

Anakin smiled, and turned to the assembled senators, who were also applauding. And then across the balcony, he saw Padmé. He started walking to her, pushing his way through the crowds around him, and ended up running, not caring if he jostled those in his way.

“Padmé, you came!” he said as he reached her. “I can’t believe you’re here!”

Padmé smiled. “I’m where I belong, Ani,” she told him. “Back with you.”

Anakin said nothing in response, for his emotions were too powerful to allow him to speak. Instead he pulled her into his embrace, ignoring the holocameras around them, and simply held her close, knowing she was there to stay.

Celebrations had been planned for the citizenry, and filled the rest of the day. While this was going on, senators and other dignitaries toured the new space station. All were duly impressed by the cutting edge technology, and excited by the promise that it represented for the future of the galaxy.

“And to think that all of this was originally intended to destroy,” Bail Organa commented as he stood with Anakin and Padmé. ‘Palpatine was truly a madman.’

“He was a monster,” Padmé added. “The galaxy was a dark place when he was alive.” She looked up at Anakin. “But the darkness is gone now,” she said, linking her arm through his. “And will never return again.”

Mon Mothma nodded. “A bright future indeed, thanks to you, Anakin,” she said.

“I only did what any father would do,” Anakin said. “I needed to make the galaxy safe for my family, and would do so at any cost. You can understand that, can’t you Senator Organa?” he asked.

Bail smiled. “Completely,” he replied.

“How are things going with the new additions to the family, Bail?” Padmé asked.

“Hectic,” Bail replied, the smile not leaving his face. ‘I am so grateful to Anakin for making this opportunity possible.’

“It was Leia’s idea, you know,” Anakin told him.

Bail was surprised. “Really?”

Anakin nodded. “She remembered how devastated you and Breha were when I took her to live with me. She still cares a great deal about you both.”

“There will always be a place in our hearts for Leia,” Bail replied. “I hope that’s all right with you,” he hastened to add.

“Leia is a beautiful person,” Padmé replied. “She touches everyone who knows her. I can’t imagine how she could be anything but special to you and Breha after she spent her first ten years with you.”

Bail nodded. “I hope in time you will bring her to visit us on Alderaan,” he ventured. “I’d like her to meet the younglings,” he added.

“I think we can do that,” Anakin said. “Once our own lives have settled down a bit,” he added, looking at Padmé with a smile.

“Yes, you’ll soon be having two more little ones yourselves,” Organa remembered. “That will keep you busy,” he added with a smile.

“Yes, it will,” Padmé agreed. She looked up at Anakin. “I can’t wait.”

The day of celebrations ended with a spectacular display of fireworks as soon as the sky grew dark. It had been Anakin’s intention to replace Empire day with this day, the day of rebirth for the galaxy, a day he hoped would be commemorated for years to come as the dawn of a new era.

It was quite late when Anakin and Padmé returned to their home.

"It's so good to be home," Padmé said as they walked up the stairs together. "The kids were so excited when we arrived."

Anakin smiled. "I guess I'll have to wait for morning to talk to them," he said.

Padmé nodded. "Let's check on them," she suggested.

"I was just about to suggest that," he replied as they reached the twins' rooms. Opening the door quietly, they entered Luke's room first. Seeing his son sleeping in his own bed back at home filled Anakin with a warm sense of wellbeing. He smiled as he saw Luke's clothes all over the floor. *Some things never change*, he mused. Walking into Leia's room next, they approached her bed quietly, and watched her sleep for a few moments before leaving her once more.

"There's something I want to show you," Anakin said to Padmé as they stepped out into the corridor.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Come and see," he replied, taking her hand.

Anakin brought Padmé down the hallway to the room where he had spent many hours in her absence. The lights turned on as they stepped into the room, and Padmé gasped in surprise when she beheld the room's contents.

"Anakin," she said softly, walking around the room. "When did you do all this?"

"When you were away," he told her.

Padmé walked over to the cribs, running her hand slowly over the finely crafted wood. "Where did you get these?" she asked. "They look handmade."

"They are," he told her. 'I made them.'
She looked up at him. "You did?"

Anakin nodded, walking over to her. "And the dresser, and the change table," he added. "The shelves... I needed to do something, Padmé, something to show you how much it means to me that you're giving me more children. I hope you like it," he added.

"Like it?" she asked. 'I love it!' she added, throwing her arms around him. "I love you."

Anakin held her close, pleased that she was so happy with his surprise. He focused on her for a moment, and then smiled. "I know how to finish the decorating," he told her.

Padmé looked up at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I know now what gender the babies are," he said.

"Are you going to tell me?" she asked with a smile.

"Let's just say that Leia is going to be vastly outnumbered," he told her.

Padmé smiled. "Boys," she said. "Two more Skywalker men."

"Think you can handle that?" he asked, looking down at her with a smile.

Padmé looked up at him. “Well, if I can handle their father, I’m sure I can handle them too,” she told him.

Anakin laughed. “Oh and you know how to handle their father,” he said. “No doubt about that.”

Padmé smiled. “Let’s go to bed, Ani,” she said.

Anakin nodded, and took her hand. The lights turned off as they left the room and closed the door behind them.

One year later

Leia giggled as one of her baby brothers, Connor, splashed happily in the pool.

“Splash war!” Luke declared, bringing Connor’s twin, Colin closer to Leia and Connor. The two babies laughed as they splashed in the water, and the more they splashed, the harder they laughed.

“Seems the younglings are like you, Padmé,” Obi-Wan commented. “Because I don’t remember *ever* seeing Anakin enjoying the water that much.”

Anakin laughed. “You’re right there,” he agreed. “I prefer to remain at a safe, dry distance,” he added.

Padmé smiled. “Difficult to do at bath time, though,” she pointed out. “He usually gets drenched when we bathe the babies,” she told Obi-Wan and Riema.

Riema laughed. “I remember those days,” she said, watching her own two children playing in the pool with the Skywalker children.

“I think they’ve had enough for now,” Padmé said, getting off of her lounge chair.

“I’ll help,” Riema offered, getting up too. “Since I know you don’t like to get wet,” she added, looking at Anakin.

Obi-Wan chuckled at her comment.

“Bring him here, Leia,” Padmé said, sitting at the side of the pool. “Luke, give Colin to Riema.”

Luke and Leia brought their baby brothers over to the pool’s edge and handed them out to the waiting arms of Padmé and Riema. Anakin stood up and grabbed a pair of towels for the babies, and walked over to take one of his baby son’s.

“Had enough for one day, big guy?” he asked Colin as he wrapped him in the towel. “Did you have fun splashing your big brother and sister?”

Colin smiled up at his father, not understanding his words, but excited by the attention nonetheless.

“Come here, little one,” Obi-Wan said, taking Connor from Riema.

“Come on, Obi-Wan,” Anakin said. “Let’s get these little ones dressed for dinner.”

Obi-Wan was delighted to have a chance to help out, and followed Anakin into the house and upstairs.

“You know all this practice may come in handy some day,” Anakin told Obi-Wan as they entered the nursery.

“You think so, do you?” Obi-Wan asked.

Anakin nodded as he set Colin down on the change table. “You may have one of your own in the not so distant future,” he explained.

“Perhaps,” Obi-Wan said, trying to appear casual when in reality the thought of being a father excited him beyond measure.

“Well, Riema’s still young enough to have more children,” Anakin pointed out.

Obi-Wan laughed. “We’re not even married yet, and you have us with a new baby already,” he remarked.

Anakin smiled. “Details, mere details,” he replied.

Obi-Wan watched Anakin dress his young son for a moment before replying. “In truth, there’s nothing I’d like more,” he said finally. “When I see the joy that your own children have brought to your life, it makes me want my own.”

Anakin picked up Colin and looked at Obi-Wan. “There’s nothing like being a father, Obi-Wan,” he said. “My children have enriched my life in ways I can’t even describe. I wouldn’t feel complete without them.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “I can see that,” he replied. ‘You’re an excellent father, Anakin,’ he added. “I only hope if I’m given the chance I will be half as good.”

“You’ll be every bit as good,” Anakin assured him. ‘You have all the makings of a great father,’ he added. “Trust me, I know.”

Obi-Wan smiled as he set Connor down on the change table, hoping that one day he’d have the chance to prove Anakin right.

Chapter 123

Epilogue

Four years later

Master Yoda sat in the council chamber, waiting. It seemed he waited a lot lately; luckily he had enormous patience to match his enormous age.

Finally Obi-Wan entered the room, pulling his cloak straight as he did so. "I'm sorry masters," he said as he hurried to his seat. "The baby had us up all night, and..." he stopped when he saw Anakin hiding a smile behind his hand. "I'm glad you find this amusing," he commented as he sat down.

"It's just nice to see the always calm, always collected Obi-Wan Kenobi looking like... well, like you do right now," Anakin replied with a smile.

Obi-Wan frowned. "And how is that?"

"Well, your hair's a mess," Anakin began, "and you have spit up on your tunic," he pointed out.

Obi-Wan ran a hand through his hair. "You'd look like this too if you didn't sleep a wink last night," he muttered.

"Oh, I have," Anakin replied. "Been there, done that my friend." It wasn't that long ago that Colin and Connor were newborns like your wee one."

Obi-Wan smiled. "Yes, true," he replied. 'She smiled this morning,' he told Anakin. "For the first time."

Anakin smiled. "You cried, didn't you?" he asked.

"I most certainly did not," Obi-Wan replied, smoothing down his rather rumpled looking cloak.

Anakin simply smiled, and knew better.

"May we begin now, gentlemen?" Yoda asked.

"Yes, yes Master Yoda," Obi-Wan replied. "Forgive me."

Yoda had not regretted changing the Code, for enabling Jedi to have families had been good for the new order; the offspring of the small group of Jedi that had come forth from hiding represented the future.

"Begin now, we will," Yoda said. "Where are the younglings?"

"I'll send for them," Anakin said, and activated his comlink. A moment later Luke and Leia entered the room.

Now sixteen years old, the elder Skywalker twins were nearing the end of their apprenticeship, and had developed into powerful Jedi. The medichlorian count of all four of Anakin's children was higher than anyone's had ever been, except for their father. Having already begun their apprenticeship under their father's tutelage, Connor and Colin were already well on their way to becoming Jedi knights as well.

"What do you have to report, Padawan Skywalker?" Neeja Halycone asked Leia.

"Early indications show that Master Yoda's initial readings were correct," Leia reported. "It seems that there is a youngling on Corellia who has demonstrated Force abilities."

Yoda nodded. "Your opinion, Luke?" he asked.

"I think we should invite the parents of this girl to bring her here for you to test her," he said.

Anakin said nothing, but smiled with pride at his two eldest children, at their poise and maturity.

"I agree, Luke," Obi-Wan said. "May we leave it to you to contact her parents?"

"I'll take care of it right away, Master Obi-Wan," Luke replied.

*You mean **we'll** take care of it,* Leia corrected him silently.

Luke rolled his eyes. *Don't embarrass us, Leia,* he replied.

Anakin, who had heard the entire conversation, covered his mouth to hide his smile.

"Thank you younglings," Yoda said. "You may leave now."

Luke and Leia bowed together, and then left the room.

Later that afternoon

"I can't believe Master Yoda is letting us go to Corellia," Leia gushed as she arrived home with her father and brothers.

Anakin smiled. "I'm not sure how your mother will feel about that," he said.

"You can talk her into it, Dad," Luke assured him. "Right?"

Anakin laughed. "Perhaps," he replied.

"Can we come too, Daddy?" Connor asked.

"Uh... well, I don't know about that," Anakin replied. "Mommy would miss you a great deal."

"Won't she miss Luke and Leia too?" Colin asked.

Anakin looked at the elder twins in exasperation. They merely laughed.

"There you are," Padmé said as she met her family in the foyer. The boys ran to her, surrounding her with hugs. "You hungry?" she asked.

"Yes!" they cried as one.

Padmé smiled. “Okay, up you go to wash up for dinner,” she said. “You too,” she added, looking up at her teenage twins.

Luke and Leia each took a little brother by the hand and headed upstairs with them as Anakin reached his wife.

“How was the meeting?” she asked as he kissed her cheek.

“Yoda wants Luke and Leia to go to Corellia,” he told her. “Their first solo mission.”

Padmé nodded. “I guess it’s time,” she said.

“Yes it is,” he replied, relieved that she seemed to accept the news. He smiled as he remembered Obi-Wan. ‘Obi-Wan was quite a sight today,’ he told her as they started up the stairs. “I guess Hanna had them up all night, and he was a total mess. It was great,” he grinned.

Padmé smiled. “I hope you didn’t tease him too much,” she said.

“Of course I did,” he replied. “I’ve waited years to get the chance to do so.”

“Well, it’s just that... he can give as good as he gets,” she said to him.

“I know that,” he replied. “But I don’t have to worry about that happening now that the boys are older.”

Padmé lifted her eyebrows. “It’s not the boys I’m thinking of,” she told him.

Anakin frowned, not knowing what she was saying, and then stopped in his tracks. He looked at her. “Are you telling me what I think you’re telling me?” he asked.

Padmé simply smiled.

THE END

I wanted to send out a message to all my amazing readers to thank you all for the incredible support you’ve given to me on this site. 3000+ reviews for this story !! That’s incredible!!! Your reviews, positive comments and encouragement really mean a lot to me, and they inspire me to write every day.

I always find it sad to end a story, for me it’s like saying goodbye to good friends. However, you know me well enough by now I think to know that there is always another idea knocking about in my head. In this case, two new ideas.

I’ve been working on two new stories that I am looking forward to posting soon. One is a vignette, a sequel to The Protector. It takes place ten years down the road, and is a short, light hearted glimpse at the Skywalker family. I have considered doing a sequel for a while, but decided I would do so as a series of vignettes. This will be the first— hopefully you’ll enjoy it.

The second story I’m working on is a really different one— it’s a Vader/Padmé story, only this time Padmé is part of the Rebel Alliance. I’m well under way with this one, and hope to be able to post on here soon.

Once again, thanks for the support, and stay tuned for the new stories coming soon!

TheRealThing